
THE TRANSFIGURATION OF NATURE IN THE DIVINE LITURGY

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Abstract

The Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Tradition is the main service of the Church that includes the transfiguration of matter into the Body of Christ, given for all for the forgiveness of sins. The Science could articulate a connection between the fractal theories and the relativity theory with the qualitative, spiritual principle of being in the Liturgy: *pars pro toto* that involves that every part includes in itself the whole. This reality, evident for the human person – that is the humanity in a unique perspective – is the final, eschatological reality of the world, where the matter will be transformed into life and light. The Science begins to understand the meaning of the part into the whole, the presence of everything in the smallest parts through the small infinite and the meaning of creation as glory and providence of a Being who loves beauty and diversity. The Divine Liturgy is a unique and perfect way of understanding how the whole Christ our God is present in every particle of Bread and in every drop of Wine as the principle of the presence in the end of times of everything in Him and of the totality in every part.

Keywords: matter, Pars pro toto, creation, Eucharist, diversity, uniqueness, presence

1. Introduction

The beauty and the order of this world whiteness a Creator, Source of beauty and life, God. In Christianity, the world is the icon of the beauty of the Creator and God is the Lover of Mankind: „For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3. 16).

The unending love of God for the human being is a permanence of human life. More than that, God descends in the darkness of death to rise up the fallen man. The death and Resurrection of Christ are the paschal event in which God fills the entire universe with His love. The Cosmos becomes a Church full with the Light of His Resurrection. The whole creation becomes procession toward Resurrection.

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This event of the eternal love of God is a permanent reality in the Church – His ecclesial and mystical Body. In the Church, the restoration of Cosmos and of humanity through the sacrificial love of the Cross and Resurrection is celebrated. The Church is a perpetual Pentecost because the Holy Spirit descends always in her, to bring Christ in the heart of every believer. The Divine Liturgy is the temporal event in which the ecclesial humanity enters into the eschatological reality of the Risen Christ, the Kingdom of God. The Liturgy is the doxological concentration of history in order to become the infinite point of eternity, shared and dispersed into the world as holiness of life. This double act of concentration and dispersion is called by Saint Maximus the Confessor *sustolh-diaistolh - systole-diaстole* as the unique heartbeat of God in time.

The Church's theology always emphasizes the reality of this transfiguration of the matter into light in the Divine Liturgy. In the Liturgy, the human person feeds himself with the Holy Mysteries, becomes one with Christ, and receives in his being the Body and the Blood of Crucified and Risen Christ.

This transfiguration of humanity into the Body of Christ/the Church is not only a liturgical metaphor or doxological anamnesis, but the fundamental reality of the Church, the icon of the final transfiguration of the Universe into the Kingdom of God. The ecclesial humanity is called to assume and transfigure the world.

We will try to analyse some of the aspects of this transfiguration of the matter in the Divine Liturgy. In the Liturgy are concentrated all the senses and prophecies of history, the past and the present of humanity, because the Liturgy is the self-giving of Christ, the Son of God, the Creator and the Absolute Future of the world. The Liturgy is the new creation of the world, the death and the resurrection of the world in the eternal Christ.

For the Risen Christ, the world became transparent and full of light because the final sense of the world is its humanization in the Church.

2. The Liturgy – restoration of the cosmic harmony

The Paradise of the first human persons was a reality of beauty and harmony between human being and nature. The light of God lighted through the man on every creature on Earth, fulfilling their sense and their vocation. The primary human being was a 'priest of the creation' [1] because he integrated the nature in himself and brought her as a sacrifice on the altar of the love of God.

Through the fall, the nature becomes stranger, alien to the disobedient man and woman, the nature is hurt by the human fault and hurts the human being through her adversity concerning the failure of human vocation. The fallen man kills for living, becomes a despot of the nature, destroys her systematically, and through that calls the death on himself (herself), because the human person is called to feed with the love of God, and the food coming from nature can only postpone his death as divorce from the Source of Life.

Saint Paul the Apostle sees this mutual adversity of man and nature as a birth (labour) pain of the new man, reborn from “water and Spirit” (John 3.5), through Baptism: “we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pain until now” (Romans 8.22).

Through the death and Resurrection of Christ, mystically and really present in the Divine Liturgy, the adversity and the revolt of the fallen nature are conquered by the fullness of the love of God. In the Liturgy, the created nature re-finds her natural vocation of Eucharistic service of man and of the doxological hymn brought to God. Thus, all the miracles performed by Jesus Christ on Earth show the Eucharistic vocation of the nature: the bread is multiplied through prayer, the fish crowd themselves into the nets of the Apostles to show their finality, to serve eucharistically to humanity.

The bread and wine that are consecrated in the Divine Liturgy are the foretaste (arrabon) of the whole nature, which is in a state of sacrifice for the restored man in Christ. All the beauty and diversity of the nature as found in the Eucharistic elements. The bread is the unity of all wheaten grain in a unique Food of Life, and the wine is the sacrifice of all the grapes to become the Blood of Christ. This mystical metaphor of multitude in unity becomes icon of the unity in the Church, where the diverse and free persons form a unique Body of Christ. A document of the early Church, *Didache* (100 A.D.) speaks of this metaphor of unity in diversity and of sacrificial presence of matter in the Divine Liturgy. So, during the blessing of Eucharistic bread, the priest prays: “We thank Thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the Earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever”. [2] [Didache 9. 2] This text of a venerable theological elevation speaks of the Eucharist as a prophecy and foretaste of the Kingdom of God and as a Sacrament of unity for the Church of Christ.

The bread and wine are not the elements directly taken out of nature, but they are the transfigured nature through the work of human persons. The wheat is grinded and baked, and the wine is pressed by the wine-press in order to show that the created matter must be humanized through human work in order to become Eucharistic matter. Also, the wheaten grain prophetically preserves in himself the mystery of death and Resurrection of Christ and of humanity: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12. 24)

The wine is the living drink that bears in itself the light of the Sun and the life of the Earth, this is the reason why the wine blossoms, rises up every spring, every Resurrection. These Eucharistic elements are the concentration and the symbol of the presence of the entire creation at the Mystical Supper of the immortality of the sons of God. Thus the Holy Eucharist was called by Saint Ignatius of Antioch ‘the medicine of immortality’ (faʃmakon aqanasiaj),

because receiving the Eucharist we activate in ourselves the image of Christ, ‘the Eternal Easter’.

3. The Liturgy – prayer for the whole creation

The Liturgy is a unique event of the prayer of Church, because integrates the entire world and all the history. In Liturgy, the priest and the believers pray for all the human persons, living or departed, near or far. Time and space as receptacles of the sequential reality and of the limits of creation are transfigured and concentrated through prayer. The Sacrifice of Christ unites in Himself Heaven and Earth, past and future, God and humanity, moments and centuries, living and dead. In the great cosmic prayer of the Liturgy the whole humanity is present, being in a state of sacrifice, assumed by Christ, the One who filled time and space with His love: “He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things” (Ephesians 4.10).

The presence of creation in this liturgical dance of the love of God is evident and natural. The inaugural blessing of the Liturgy: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages” offers to us the liturgical perspective of the Church. The goal of the Liturgy is the Kingdom of God and the Way toward this Kingdom is the progressive transformation of the world in Church through grace. Every Liturgy endorses the world to the Kingdom of God. And this because of the reasons (l ogoi) of the creature which orientates her to her Creator. The Cosmos is a Liturgy in becoming, and the Liturgy is a cosmos of the shared love. The whole world becomes a procession toward the New Jerusalem.

In the *Great Litany*, the Church prays for all in the Heaven, in the sky and on the Earth. It is firstly requested from God ‘the peace from above’ or ‘the peace of God’ (αἰσῶν ἐκ ἄνω), given by Christ in the night of His betrayal and in the evening after the Resurrection (John 14.27 and John 20.19-21). Then, the Church prays for all categories of believers, alive or departed in faith. The care for creation and the liturgical conscience of cosmos is present in one of the prayers of the Great Litany: “For favorable weather, for abundance of the fruits of the earth, and temperate seasons, let us pray to the Lord”.

Also, the Church prays for the blessing of all the elements of matter: the water is blessed during the Epiphany, the fire is blessed during the Service of Resurrection “The Light of Christ lights on all the world” (one of the liturgical expressions in the Lent) [Quadragesima], the air is blessed and filled with the fragrance of the incense, the Earth is blessed through the prayer for the houses, for the Church building, for the fountains etc. We see thus the continuity between creation and humanity. The Church cannot conceive the matter without the human persons, the kings of creation, cannot conceive the world without her plerome, the humanity: “The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24.1). The prayer for the elements is united with the prayer for the people who live in them: “For travellers by land, sea, and air,

for the sick, the suffering, the captives, and for their salvation, let us pray to the Lord”.

The Church transforms the creation into *eschaton*, because takes a part of the Church, prays for her integrity (*pars pro toto*), and receives the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. The Liturgy is performed in a limited space and in a determined time, but is the celestial eternal Liturgy of the unlimited Kingdom, the sacrifice on the Cross and the resurrection of Christ for us. The Eucharist is therefore the sacramental and substantial entrance into the eternal reality of the life of Trinity, where the Cross and Resurrection are the permanence of triadic love.

The great theologian John Zizioulas asserts that the Liturgy is the “receiving of the creation” and the Eucharist is ‘the anaphora of the world’ [1, p. 14] and transforms the human person in what he (she) is in reality [1, p. 16]. It is true that corruption and death begins and ends with the body, but through the becoming (*metabolē*) of the consecrated matter in the Body and the Blood of Christ, we see the vocation of immortality for the whole humanity, body and soul. The status of eschatological Resurrection begins with the dead and risen Christ and fulfils in Him at the end of ages.

4. The Divine Liturgy – the re-creation of the world

The Christian Liturgy celebrates the permanence of the Resurrection into the life of the Church. She is an entrance (*εἰς ὁδοῦ*) into the paschal reality of the Kingdom of God. The relative and temporal human being enters into the eternal love of the Trinity, where the Heavenly Liturgy is celebrated, which is the Eternal Pascha, the eternal Self-giving of the Son to the Father. Every Liturgy is a foretaste of the Resurrection of Christ, in which all the people will enter at the end of the world. This is the meaning of the words of our Saviour: “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10. 9). The entrance and the exit to and from the pastures of life are in the Divine Liturgy.

The patristic Theology of the Eastern Church emphasized on the paschal sense of the human vocation of union with God and the Resurrection of Christ as a re-creation of the world: “That Sunday, the Pascha, is the Sunday of salvation. The celebration of salvation, the boundary between the tomb and the resurrection, the Sunday of the second creation, in order to, as the first creation begun in a Sunday, the second creation begin in the same day, the first and the eight, greater than the greatest day, more miraculous than the miracle, she regards to the heavenly life”. [St. Gregory of Nazians, *44th Homily - Sunday of Resurrection*, P.G. 36, col. 608-621.]

Father Dumitru Staniloae says that “the Eucharist engraves in us the status of Resurrection” [3]. These words show that in the Church, the Christians are the people of Resurrection, human persons that bear in them the promise and the meaning of immortality with and in Christ, the One who died and raised for us.

The Divine Liturgy – the entrance of the Church in the light of Risen Christ – is the re-creation of the world in the uncreated light of the Resurrection. This is the meaning of the presence three times in the prayers of the Liturgy the creation of the world from nothing (*ex nihilo*). The Liturgy re-creates the Cosmos, brings her back from the nothingness to the Supreme Being. So, the priest prays during the *Trisagion Hymn*: “Holy God, You dwell among Your saints. You are praised by the Seraphim with the thrice holy hymn and glorified by the Cherubim and worshiped by all the heavenly powers. You have brought all things out of nothing into being”. So, the *Trisagion Hymn* is the entry of the Church into the angelic Liturgy, where the Lamb of God eternally loves His Father. Then, in the *Liturgy of believers*, during the great *Anaphora* priest prays: “It is proper and right to sing to You, bless You, praise You, thank You and worship You in all places of Your dominion; for You are God ineffable, beyond comprehension, invisible, beyond understanding, existing forever and always the same; You and Your only begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit. You brought us into being out of nothing, and when we fell, You raised us up again. You did not cease doing everything until You led us to heaven and granted us Your kingdom to come”. [4] And after the *epiclesis* (invocation), the priest says: “We give thanks to You, invisible King. By Your infinite power You created all things and by Your great mercy You brought everything from nothing into being”.

These three occurrences of the creation of the world *ex nihilo* show the conscience of the Early Church that the Liturgy is the recreation of the world, is the mystical entrance into the Kingdom of God, and the presence of the eschatological realities into the life of the world, the “powers of the future age” (Hebrews 6. 5) working into the leaven of the Church in order to become the living Bread of Life.

After the words of institution, the Church added a liturgical formula that could explain all the Eucharistic theology: “Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all” (“*ta sa ek tw n sw n, soi prof e ront e j kata pa nta kai dia pa nta*”) [4, p. 65], [5]. The Holy Gifts belong to God, we belong to God and we offer ourselves although we are already His. The Eucharistic offering is carrying all the cosmos as the total offering of love in Christ. The Church offers the world to God, and receives God Himself, “the Offerer and the Offered, the Receiver and the Received” [4, p. 53].

The bread and the wine become through representation the sacred matter concentrating in them all the vocation of the cosmos to become living body. In the Eucharistic elements, the whole universe receives transformation, a new image and a new substance. The particle becomes whole, and the Body of Christ present throughout the ages on the Holy Tables is not a part of Christ, but the whole Christ, living for ever. This transformation is received only through prayer to the Father as a sign of human freedom. The Eucharist is prayer and

invocation (ἐπικλῆσις), not only liturgical anamnesis. The world is revealed in her essence of prayer, creative dialogue of God with the created freedom.

The moment of communion has a special cosmologic and theological significance. At the call of the priest: “Let us attend! The Holy things for the holy” The Church acknowledges the imperfection of her members: “One is holy. One is the Lord Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father. Amen” [4, p. 75].

Then the priest takes the Body of Christ in his hands and says: “Divided and distributed is the Lamb of God, who is divided, yet not disunited; who is ever eaten yet never consumed, but sanctifying those who partake thereof. Jesus Christ is Victor”. This assertion concentrates all the Christology of the Church, where Christ is the ‘Fountain of Immortality’ [4, p. 81] who springs all the life of the world. In Christ, all the reasons of the world are assumed and transcended, the limit becomes infinity, the moment becomes eternity, the point becomes cosmos (the new creation), and the division does not diminish, but multiplies. The created world is therefore the sequential flashlight of the eschatological mystery of love: the love and giving create life. The matter loses in Eucharist her reductive, limited, relative sense. She becomes Body: the Body of God, infinite, eternal new, evident through the light of faith. The theological metaphor of this eschatological reality is the burning candle, giving itself as light, yet not diminishing through self-giving, but remaining whole and transforming the wax into light and warmth.

The teaching of the Church of Christ says that salvation is universal. She comprehends the human persons and the nature assumed by Him. That is why the human person has to love the nature who feeds and support his life. The liturgical expression of this universal responsibility is to be found in the *Service of Easter*. After all the believers – in the midnight – receive light from the Altar, the Grave of Life, all the people goes out of the Church singing. The river of light inundate the deep night. The Church remains totally empty, symbolizing the empty Grave of creation. The resurrection is poured, pervades in the whole Universe, not only in the Church. After the Gospel of Resurrection is read, the ecclesial community surrounds the Church with lights in their hands, singing: “Christ is risen from the dead” in a liturgical and cosmic dance of Resurrection. In some places of Orthodoxy, the believers receive light, and then go to the graveyard, to enlighten the tombs of their dear ones. The graveyard becomes a cathedral of light, is not anymore a *necropolis* with *sarcophagi* (= meat eaters), but cemetery (κοιμητήριον) the place of sleep of those waiting for the Resurrection, guarded by the Cross of Christ [6].

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the matter has as ultimate and unique vocation its transfiguration into light, the entrance into the glorious world of unending grace of God, God Himself given to us. The deification (*qewsij*) is the process of change for the entire universe that will become, humanised, the Church of the future glory.

One of the possible consequences of a thorough research on Liturgy is a better clarification of the relations between Science and Theology. As Ian G. Harbour stated in ‘When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers or Partners?’ [7] there are four possible relations between Science and Theology:

1. Conflict 1.1. Scientific materialism. 1.2. Biblical literalism
2. Independence 2.1. Contrasting methods 2.2. Differing languages
3. Dialogue 3.1. Boundary questions. 3.2. Methodological parallels
4. Integration 4.1. Doctrinal reformulation 4.2. Systematic synthesis.

A patristic and liturgical research of the Divine Liturgy could offer ways of a better understanding of nature and common ground for a mutual dialogue and synthesis. The fourth category of relations could be established in the sense of a widening of the technical boundaries of the language for both: Science and Theology.

For instance, the presence of the whole in the part (*pars pro toto*), already configured in the fractal realities or relativity theories, is one of the main vectors in Theology, where the human person assumes, includes and transfigures the entire humanity and the Cosmos. The person is the Cosmos in an unique and immortal expression. The spiritual identity between Cosmos and human person is a background for a better understanding of the relation between uniqueness and plurality in science (the unique Science present wholly in the diversity of disciplines, which are a unique perspective on the whole). The final identity (or the common finality) between the scientific experiment (happening in a certain space and time, so a local event) and the globality of its conclusions for Science is another step toward a deeper perspective of the relations between part and whole. The Science begins to understand that up to now the universal principle *totum pro parte*, which is a quantitative, materialistic, volumetric perspective on the world, is obsolete, and instead she proposes a new, qualitative, spiritual perspective – *pars pro toto*, where everything is unique and carries in itself the meaning of everything. The significance of random is about to change. (In Romanian, random is ‘intamplare’ that comes from ‘in – templum’, what is decided in the temple, in fact the effect of providence.) The end of time means the apperception of humanity on the unique value of everything and the final Judgement is about not only our personal and collective deeds, but also about what we could have done and we didn’t, the moments of lost time, the life lost in hate, laziness and indifference.

The Science enters gradually into its eschatological vocation, understanding the presence of the whole time into the moment, the presence of space into the point and the presence of humanity into every person. In fact, Science is just the human local experiment made universal through repetition in different environments. When Science will realise that every moment is unique, including in itself the totality, there will be a spiritual identity between faith and observation. The diversity present in Liturgy as a way toward unity, could be a hint for the ‘metaphor of local systems and holism’, used today by many scientists. The part is a system in its particular, unique expression, and every link is the chain itself manifested in a particular way, as every atom is a solar system caught in the small infinite.

The scientific concept of globalisation is the beginning of understanding that everything involves us all and every small event is a way toward the common goal. The Divine Liturgy is the sacrament of celebration of the ‘wholeness’ where the creation becomes human in the Body of Christ, God and Man. Moreover, the Eucharist is the creation made divine in the Body of the Saviour. Or, this is the finality of matter: to become life and light through the uncreated grace of God, “new Heaven and new Earth” (Revelation 21.1) into the Kingdom of infinite love.

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