
THE BISHOP AND THE CHURCH

TWO LITURGICAL PARADIGMS OF THE CHANGES

AFTER CONSTANTINE THE GREAT[†]

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Abstract

It is beyond doubt that Constantine the Great's ascension onto the stage of history radically changed the life of the Roman Empire. The administrative, political and military measures initiated by Diocletian and continued by the ambitious emperor transformed not just the immense empire, but also the life of the Church. The Church came triumphantly out of the catacombs, and the new legal framework, favourable to Christians, determined significant mutations not only in the public life of the Church, but also in its inner dynamics. From small, hidden communities, with services enacted in private homes, the Church becomes shortly one of the main religions in the Empire. Under Constantine and his successors, the Church launches extensive construction programmes, the cult acquires a strong ceremonial stamp with ever more sumptuous services, Christians are promoted to public positions, bishops are granted civil and political honours and distinctions.

Starting from these historical realities, this study attempts to answer the question: How did the new political and historical context the bishop's public and liturgical perception within the community? Based on Patristic testimonies and the architectural design of churches in the first centuries, our research will determine the bishop's liturgical position and role before Constantine, and how this position evolved within the Byzantine collective mental pattern.

Keywords: ecclesiastic architecture, liturgical orientation, bishop's position

1. The Church and the bishop in the Apostolic age

Although still rooted in Apostolic Christianity, the liturgical rite of Eastern Churches evolved in time, many subsequently acquired acquisitions not always being a real gain. Genuine meanings, concepts and theologies were abandoned or reshaped in the face of pastoral needs or under pressure of new historical and social realities. After the Edict of Mediolanum such a change occurred in the Church both concerning the interior architecture of the cultic

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space and the bishop's position and liturgical significance, as a centre of the ecclesial community.

The mixed usage of the terms *bishop* and *presbyter* in the *New Testament* still leaves open historic debates concerning the bishop's origin and functions in the Church of the first centuries. On this ground, without entering biblical or doctrinaire details, we shall accept *a priori* the bishop's central position in the liturgical and administrative life of the liturgical community – a position assumed by all Christian Churches in the East and West, which reality allows us to believe that, regardless of the 'evidence' supplied by the 'super-protestant' positions, his importance in the Church was from the very beginning a central one. In spite of the Apostles' seeming superiority in respect to the bishops' 'inferior class', from the pages of the New Testament and the tradition of the Church we understand that Saint James, Jerusalem's first bishop, was the central personality in the administrative and liturgical life of Jerusalem's Church. As a matter of fact, from the information provided by Luke (Acts 6.2) and Paul (1 Corinthians 1.17), the Apostles' function was primarily a missionary one, and only occasionally a liturgical and administrative one. This is why they needed to leave behind, in the cities where they had sown God's word, men dedicated to the evangelical creeds, who had to continue and strengthen their missionary work.

Without knowing any details about the administration of the Apostolic Christian communities, based on the Judaic model at hand, we may formulate the hypothesis of a collegial leadership (Acts 20.17) or an individual one under a bishop's authority. Despite an authoritarian and hierarchical image of bishops with regard to the Church – as the Apostle Paul seems to present his disciples Titus and Timothy, and as bishops appear today – their relation with the other believers was one of brotherhood and of a *continuous, close, immediate presence amidst the community*. This dignity and position was acquired, and stood in *close connection with the people*, which made a decisive contribution to the bishops' promotion following a continuous oversight by the inner (1 Timothy 3.13) and outer (1 Timothy 3.7) community. In spite of the main significance of the word (*episcopos* = supervisor), the association made by the Saint Apostle Peter between *episcopos* and *shepherd* (ποιμην και επισκοπος – 1 Peter 2.25) reveals that the bishop's true function is neither that of a 'liturgical clerk', 'employee' or 'officer', nor that of an 'ecclesial *gendarme*', but of a 'caretaker of spiritual matters'. This sense is fully illuminated by Paul, who tells us that the bishop must "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God" (Hebrews 12.15).

However, as regards the bishops' liturgical position and functions in the local communities (as in fact many other aspects of the life of the Church), the New Testament writings provide little information; most often the bishop's liturgical position within the community may only be deduced by analogy with the synagogue or with Saint John's vision described in the Revelation 4-8: "It is highly plausible that, when Saint John the Theologian described the view of the heavenly service he saw in the Spirit on one day of the Lord, he may have done

so in terms of the Sunday Liturgy of the Christian community in Patmos. On the bishop's chair, draped with white cloth, sat God facing the golden altar, and the presbyters sat around Him on their seats, turned into heavenly elders. In the middle sat the Lamb as if just slain. Before the chair stood the endless crowd of the Christians. The praise of the elders was an echo of that of the Church down on earth, because they praise God for the creation, for salvation, and for having made them His emperors and priests – the themes of thanksgiving over the bread and wine at the middle of the second century–, and the four living beings sing Isaiah's *Trisagion* praising God with 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' [1]

In part, we recognize in this vision the elements of the furnishings of a Christianized synagogue: the door (4.1), the *menora* (4.5), the *bema* and the chair of Moses (4.2-4), the *sacrarium* (6.9), the incensory (8.3), etc. If Hybrew's hypothesis is confirmed, the geography of liturgical space in the primary Church was dominated by the altar on which sat the slain Lamb and the bishop's throne surrounded by the presbyters' *collegium*, while the ceremonies were dominated by biblical readings (the Book of Life) and the praising and intercession prayers made by the sacerdotal college.

In the following century, Patristic literature makes a much clearer distinction between the terms bishop and presbyter, presenting to us a hierarchically structured Church, with a bishop surrounded by priests around Christ. In his *Epistle to Smyrnaeans* (VII.1-2), Saint Ignatius the Theophorus reveals a hierarchical Church with a liturgical life strictly developed around the bishop: "See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the priests as ye would the Apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the commandment of God. Let no man do anything of those pertaining to the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom the bishop hath entrusted it. Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the congregation [of the faithful] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever the bishop shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything which is done may be secure and well grounded." [2]

In spite of an excessive authority which seems to be attributed to the bishop by the bishop of Antioch, a careful reading of his texts shows that the main idea he wishes to emphasize in the *Epistle to the Magnesians* (VII.1). his writings is particularly that of the **liturgical unity around the bishop**: "Likewise, neither do ye anything without the bishops and the priests, nor should anything appear to ye to be blessed to endeavour by yourselves apart; but being together in the same place, let there be one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope, in love and in joy undefiled, Who is Jesus Christ, than Whom nothing is more excellent. Do ye therefore all run together as into a temple of God, as unto one altar around One Jesus Christ, Who came forth from the One Father, Who is One and to the Father hath returned." [2, p.167]

From the association with the temple and the altar we understand that the Christians' place of worship was a building whatsoever (even in case it were a synagogue), with no specific sacredness, but whose prestige was evidently on the rise.

2. The first Christian churches

Although it seems the first Christians did not have a favourable attitude towards houses of worship [3], yet in the late second and early third centuries we find references to shrines of their own dedicated to their cult. Unfortunately most of these buildings have not been preserved [4]. Today, however, we may form an idea about how the cult and liturgical ceremonies in the first Christian centuries were performed, by studying the few archaeological sites which can still tell us something about the churches of that age, and above all by studying the ancient Syrian churches.

Liturgical studies have shown that the most conservatory Christian Churches are the non-Chalcedonian ones, which – due to their separation from (and, sometimes undisimulated, aversion towards) the Church of Constantinople – have maintained a much less advanced cult than the Orthodox communities of the Byzantine-Constantinopolitan tradition. The liturgy, but also the architecture of these churches, continued for a long time to display Semitic features which had been maintained quasi-unmodified [5]; that is why the search for the origins of Christian liturgy and architecture should not proceed in ignorance of this liturgical heritage, and an outlining of the bishop's position within the liturgical framework and the interior geography of the cultic space as described in the liturgical sources has to primarily refer to these churches.

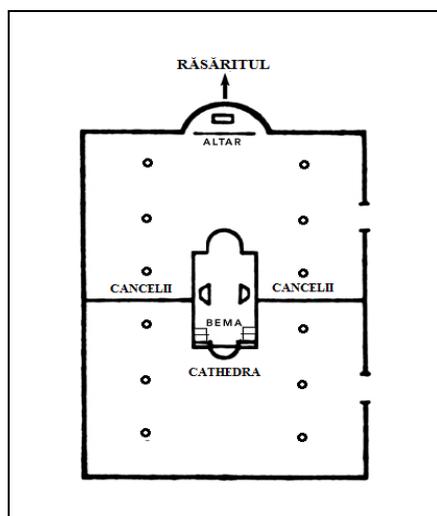


Figure 1. Syrian basilica.

The studies and researches made have highlighted a formal resemblance between Syrian (Figure 1) and Coptic churches and the ancient synagogue. Just like in a synagogue, the inner space of these churches is organized around two centres: the *bema* and the *altar* – the places where readings and prayers are made, and where the Eucharist is accomplished – everything organized along an East-oriented axis.

- **The *Bema*:** the central place of the main nave is occupied by the *bema*, on which one (sometimes even two) lecterns or *analogia* stand, from which readings are made and prayers are uttered. On the *bema*, at the end towards the altar, we find the *tabernacle*, covered by the *veil*, as well as the *candelabrum*. On the other side of the *bema*, instead of Moses' chair, is placed the *bishop's chair*, surrounded by those of the clergy.
- **The *Altar*** is placed in the eastern apse, actually the only apse in the old Syriac churches. Here, instead of the Ark (the Tabernacle of the Thora), there is a table, often in the shape of a horse-shoe (or sigma), covered by a canopy – *ciborium*, as we see in some older icons which depict the *Apostles' Communion* scene, and which stood behind a veil when liturgical actions were not in progress here [6].

However, compared to the ancient synagogue, we can also find **major differences**: 1) the first one is linked to the abside; placed at the opposite extreme from the entrance, this is no longer occupied by the Ark (tabernacle) but the (holy) **Table**; 2) the second is linked to the **liturgical orientation**: not towards Jerusalem, but towards the geographical east – an eternal orientation, not spatially located, highlighting the relation with the eschatological expectation of Christ – the East above [6, p. 23-24].

As an architectural form, the most frequent churches in the Syrian area are those in rectangular shape of the Hellenistic basilica type, with three naves separated by columns and one apse at the opposite extreme from the entrance, but also the simple rectangular one, in which, oftentimes, the width exceeds the length of the edifice [7].

Later, architectural forms with a central planimetry were developed as well. These are generally memorial churches – *marthiria* – connected to events in the life of our Lord Christ or certain Saints (e.g. the Holy Sepulchre Complex, fourth c.; Saint Symeon the Stylite Complex, etc.). Although very different (cruciform, circular, polygonal), these plans have in common the orientation around a centre, around which the edifice develops symmetrically, sometimes the liturgy and the cult being developed around this centre too (as in the San Pietro Basilica in Rome, or the Patriarchal Basilicas).

3. The theology of the sacred space in primary Christianity

Beyond formal borrowings, the first Christians also borrowed from Judaism some theological concepts which they adapted to the new religion. Among these, the most important ones are the theological motifs of the Judaic liturgical assemblies (*qahal*). The Jewish faithful gather in the temple (or

synagogue – which do not have the same liturgical purposes as the temple [5, p. 14-15]) to (a) *listen to the word of God*, (b) *common prayer* and (c) *sacrifice*, as a seen expression of the relation with God.

Christians took over these themes/motifs of the liturgical assembly, but transformed and adapted them to their own doctrine. However, the first Christian centuries had a much more dynamic Liturgy than what we have today; since the three motifs take place in different locations in the liturgical space, they shall generate, at least in the first centuries, a liturgy with an extremely dynamic aspect, unknown to churches today. Let us briefly analyse the three themes of the establishment of the church seen as a gathering:

3.1. Listening to the word of God

As most studies of liturgical architecture have shown, by its form and orientation the church had two centres corresponding to the two parts of the Liturgy. A first part would take place in the centre of the church (the Liturgy of the Word), where the *bema* was located and whence the readings and the homily – as part of Christian instruction [8] – were made, and where the bishop would also sit. Replacing the Torah, the *Gospel* is solemnly brought and laid on the *bema*, on a lectern, replacing the *Ark*. (It seems that from the time of Diocletian's persecution, who had ordered the burning of the Christians' books, they are now protected by being kept in some safer place, outside of the cultic space, whence they are brought during the liturgical service.) Thus, the bishop, sitting on the old chair of Moses, and the Gospel, are placed face to face, suggesting that the bishop is only the voice or spokesman of Christ [5, p. 27]. For the Christians, the bishop is not just the supervisor, a replacement for the rabbi sitting in the chair of Moses, but also the guarantor of the uninterrupted link with the grace of Christ come from Him through the Apostles.

3.2. The Eastern Orientation

If during the readings or the homilies the people was following the reader or the preacher by physically turning towards the centre of the church where the *bema* was located, for the prayer the faithful would turn towards the East [9].

Even today, in Syrian churches, one of the deacons exhort the people participating in the service: "*Let us turn to the east!*". This orientation comes from the conviction that the east is the place of the last coming of Christ (*parousia*), the '*Sun of righteousness*' sung by Zacharias (Luke 1.78). Thus, the new symbolism related to the *liturgical orientation has an eschatological connotation*. For the Christians, the old Jerusalem and the Holy of Holies, towards which the synagogue was oriented, no longer plays the important part that used to play for the Jews. Earthly Jerusalem has been replaced by the heavenly one (Hebrews 12.22, Revelation 21.10). Christians are no longer waiting for the rebuilding of the old temple like the Jews, since the new aeon and the new temple, the Church – the body of Christ – are realized here already.

3.3. The Altar

The motivation for the sanctuary in Christian tradition is to house the table for the eternal sacrifice. So, in time the eschatological motivation of the liturgical orientation determines a mutation in the planimetry of the interior space. Christ is not present in one specific place, but wherever the mystery of His Sacrament is celebrated. Hence results another important centre for the Christians: the Holy Table on which the Eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated. *Symbol and remembrance of the Last Supper, the **Altar Table** is the visible sign of a longitudinal axis uniting the bema (on which the **bishop** and the **Gospel** are the visible testimonies of the authenticity of the Church) with the **East**, the place of Christ.* Thus, the apse of the altar is not losing this axis, but on the contrary, it opens it towards an immaterial horizon, marked and remembered today by the cross of the crucifixion, placed in the continuation of this *axis*, behind the altar (difficult to recognise it in some churches today [10]).

The importance of the altar is also emphasized by the physical movement of the entire congregation which, gathered around the bema for the readings, sermon and prayers, moves jointly with the bishop, who descends from the bema, in order to walk to the altar where the Eucharistic liturgy will take place.

4. Ecclesial architecture after the Edict of Milan (313)

The freedom brought by the Edict of Milan, as well as Constantine's religious policy, would change the Church from its basis. That will also reflect in the architecture; both the form of churches will change, and the theological conception about the sacred space.

Having to answer the new realities – waves of new converts and a political and material support from the political authority – the new churches will radically change their architecture. Simple as they were in the first centuries, churches become majestic buildings, with ample spaces, built, patronized and maintained not just by the community, but also by high ranking officials, headed by the emperor. Committed to serve the new religion, Constantine donates to the Church certain public edifices, such as basilicas, or even heathen temples (Temple of Aphrodite in Ancyra, the Parthenon in Athens, Temple of Baal – Cavesus in Syria, etc.). From now on, the Church begins to make use of art in decorating space; sculpture, painting, mosaics, silverware and jewellery, embroidery, etc. they are 'exorcized', converted and made to serve the new religion.

The taste for pilgrimages and for rediscovering the holy places of Christianity, together with the development of the martyrs' cult, determine an extensive campaign for erecting grand churches in those places.

5. Constantine and the new theology of sacred space

All these structural modifications of society, but above all, of the Church, after Constantine the Great, left marks also concerning the theological perception of the interior topology of Christian churches.

This change occurred in three directions: (a) the changing of the bishop's place and relation with the liturgical community; b) the primary meaning of the Church – as a holy body – is supplanted by the new conception: the Church as a holy place; c) the development of a complicated ceremonial due to the large spaces offered by the huge basilicas and the emergence of specialists of the Liturgy (this situation shall become more compelling after the sixth century, with the development of hymnography which limited the people's effective participation in the liturgical dialog).

5.1. *The bishop's separation from the people*

A characteristic feature for this period and this type of churches was the bishop's throne moved from the *bema* into the main apse (of the altar); the crowds had to see and hear the service, and the height of the bema would rather obstruct the view. Around it are placed the chairs of his priests, forming the *synthronē*. This mutation occurs in the context of the bishops being granted some special honours, heretofore reserved just for high officials [11, 12]. Bishops could carry the *palium* (the distinctive sign of Roman nobility), and before those candles were carried, incense was burned, etc. – all these meant to subconsciously create a new person: the bishop – a person head and shoulders above the community. This new perception of the bishop stands in a glaring contradiction to the old idea of a caretaker of souls sitting in the middle of the liturgical congregation, among the faithful (the bema and his chair were at the centre of the church).

From now on *the bishop is no longer perceived as an authority 'in the Church', but 'above it'*. And, once the bishop has turned into a high-ranking public personality, the clergy become his 'court' of nobles and servants, who in their turn also claim enhanced rights and honours. These would be 'granted' along with the birth of *suffragan parishes* and *dioceses*: bishopless local churches, in utter liturgical dissonance with what we have seen asserted by Ignatius of Antioch.

Sounding a distinct note of triumphalism, the bishops' new social position leads to a first separation between the clergy and the people of God, a separation unknown in the primary Christianity [5, p. 34]. The altar, the holiest of places, has now two centres: the sacrificial *altar* and the *bishop's chair*. From now on, the bishop no longer walks together with the people towards the altar in order to bring jointly the Eucharistic sacrifice, but waits for the congregation of the faithful to bring the gifts in order then to present them to God, in the name of his community. (In a certain sense, the old liturgical eastward move stumbles over the waiting bishop). As the altar holy table becomes in time an immobile,

considerably massive element, the structure of the synthrone is modified – the bishop’s chair is super-heightened to be visible by the entire congregation during the sermons he delivers hence [13]. Concurrently, the bema is lowered more to the floor so as not to obstruct the view of the faithful, and gets closer and closer to the altar, forming in time what we now call the *solea*.

5.2. *The church is a ‘holy place’*

The increased interest in the holy places, doubled by an enhanced taste for pilgrimages, was a defining feature for the church of the age of Constantine the Great. Although the first Christians abandoned the Judaic idea of the earthly Jerusalem as a liturgical centre (and orientation), the idea of a ‘holy place’ became more and more amplified.

If, before Constantine, the ‘importance’ and ‘hierarchy’ of cities was given by the “authority of the Apostle who had been its founder, but not also by the idea of the holiness of the place itself”, things change starting with the moment when the emperor turns his attention toward the ‘holy places’ connected to the earthly life of our Saviour [14].

The new churches built throughout the empire (Rome, Palestine, Constantinople), have greatness, but not the sacredness conferred by the places linked to the Saviour’s life and activity. Things will be ‘corrected’ by the “*artificial creation of a specific holiness on the occasion of the discovery and moving of relics and by relating to certain secondary events in biblical history.*” [14, p. 174]

From now on, the importance of a sacred place is connected neither to the Eucharistic celebration, nor to the mystical body of the congregation of the faithful, but above all to the importance of the transferred reliquiae from Saints’ bodies and other holy relics.

5.3. *The complication of the ceremonial*

The new basilicas built in Constantine’s time offer impressive spaces, very different from the private homes of synagogues in which the first Christians used to observe their cultic ceremonial. “*The cult performed now by the Church could no longer keep the old style, it had to be arrayed in new attire*” [14, p. 40]. The simplicity of the beginnings was abandoned in favour of a resplendent cult, meant to impress and seduce.

“In the stately and truly solemn basilicas, the complication and ‘decoration’ of the cult was inevitable, if only because, had it been officiated in the old way, the cult would never have reached the eyes and ears of the gathering. Studying the earliest types of Liturgy and its fundamental structure, preserved until today, we can understand to what extent it assumed the existence of a reduced space and gathering, and what amplification thereof became necessary once the external conditions of its observance were changed.” [14, p. 177]

This fact, without leading to a diminishing of the inner gravity specific to the first centuries, triggered the development of an outward solemnity which emphasized not so much the intrinsic significance of the liturgical gesture (the breaking of bread, raising of hands), as its external formal aspect, meant to confer to it additional sacredness, holy awe, which are directly experienced by the participants in the cult: ample ceremonies, processions inside and outside the ecclesial space, numerous clergy, wide gestures, lustrous raiment, decorated churches, etc.

6. Conclusions

Although we are not entitled to regard the course outlined above as having been followed by all the provinces in the Byzantine Empire (the freedom of liturgical expression being quite large in the first Christian millennium), the changes which occurred in the architecture of Constantinian and post-Constantinian churches led to the following:

- the bishop moved from the centre of the liturgic community to its extremity and above it – the Synthronon within the apse of the altar;
- the two liturgical centres of pre-Constantinian churches, corresponding in fact to the two parts of the Holy Liturgy (the Liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic Liturgy), were concentrated into a single one – the Altar. From now on, the liturgical Table – a sign of Christ's mystical and Eucharistic presence – shall compete in importance with the bishop's throne – a sign of the earthly power of the head of the local church.

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