
THE BYZANTINE PROTHESIS HYPOTHESES ON THE EUCHARISTIC CONSECRATION OF THE 'COMMEMORATIVE PARTICLES'

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Abstract

The present instructions of the 'Hieratikon' indicate that at the Divine Liturgy the priest shall not communicate the people from the commemorative particles, but just from the only consecrated Lamb. We know that in the past several breads were offered at the Eucharist and all were consecrated. Beginning with the VIIIth century parts from the Eucharistic loaves were cut, symbolizing the Lord's Passion. From the XIth century special formulas were recited by the celebrant when he prepared the additional particles, commemorating the dead, the living and the saints. This increasing ritualization of the 'Prothesis' caused in time some confusions as to whether these particles are to be consecrated together with the Lamb or not. Surprisingly, in the XVth century Saint Symeon of Thessalonika is the first who makes a clear distinction between the consecrated Lamb and the 'un-consecrated particles'. Was there a different approach regarding the additional 'merides' before Saint Symeon? The purpose of the present paper is to offer an answer to this question.

Keywords: liturgy, prosphora, merides, consecration, communion

1. Introduction

According to the present-day liturgical practice, it is considered that of all the particles of bread placed on the diskos at the Divine Liturgy, only the Lamb is consecrated into the Holy Body of Christ. Therefore, the rubrics in the *Hieratikon* prescribe that the priest shall not communicate the people from the portion of bread which represent the Theotokos, or from the particles representing the nine ranks of the saints or the faithful, but only from the two parts of the consecrated Lamb, namely, the NI and the KA [1]. Moreover, in the Russian and Romanian usage the un-consecrated commemorative particles are not supposed to be placed into the chalice until after the communion of the laity. These instructions first appeared in the *Služebniki* of Striatin (1604), and were then included in the

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famous *Služebniki* of Peter Mohyla (1629 and 1639) and of the reforming Patriarch Nikon (1655) [2]. Regarding the Romanian *Hieratikon*, they were initially inserted in the edition printed at Bucharest in 1680.

Recently, P. Pruteanu, a Romanian liturgist, has challenged this teaching, arguing that according to the Eucharistic theology of the Early Church, we all constitute that bread which becomes the Body of Christ at the Liturgy, from which we also partake, realizing the Church, which is not somewhere near Christ, as in the symbolic representation of the present day *Prothesis*, but in Christ. Therefore, in his opinion, extracting some particles just for the sake of “empty symbols” represents a corruption of the ancient Eucharistic ecclesiology [3]. Moreover, a Russian theologian, M. Asmus, challenges the contemporary theologians to answer this question: “Is it correct to offer during the Divine Liturgy another type of sacrifice (namely the ‘un-consecrated’ particles) together with the Sacrifice which, according to our Lord, is truly His Body?” In other words, what is the purpose to offer a relative sacrifice, if we already offer the absolute one? [4]

In this paper, following some of the evidence analysed by Asmus and adding some new liturgical and historical evidence, I try to demonstrate that the opinion expressed by Symeon of Thessalonika, which eventually became dominant, that the commemorative particles are not consecrated at the Divine Liturgy, but remain only blessed bread, is a late conception, and that we can assume that the Byzantines thought otherwise in the past.

2. From plural Eucharistic loaves to multiple particles

It is well known that in the Early Church multiple breads were consecrated during the Liturgy in order to ensure a sufficient quantity for the large numbers of communicants. In the Vth century, the *Testamentum Domini* says that three breads are offered at the Saturday Liturgy, as a type of the Trinity, and four breads on Sunday, as a type of the Gospel [5]. We find further proof for the using of multiple Eucharistic breads in *Sermo de paschate et de sacrosanta eucharistia* of Patriarch Eutychius of Constantinople (552-565, 577-582) (PG 86.2, 2400-2401), in the *Chronicon paschale* for the year 624 (PG 92, 1001) and also in *Questiones et dubia* 41 of Saint Maxim the Confessor (ca. 626) (PG 90, 820).

The decline in the reception of communion has determined, on the one hand, the reduction of the quantity of Eucharistic species and, on the other hand, the development of the liturgical drama and the understanding of the Eucharist as a propitiation sacrifice and as an intercession offering for the dead and the living. The liturgical commentary of Patriarch Germanus I of Constantinople, *Ἱστορία Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ καὶ Μυστικὴ Θεωρία* (ca. 730), mentions for the first time the gesture of cutting a piece from the Eucharistic loaf, signifying the Lord’s Passion [6]. From de IXth century the passage from *Isaiah* 53, 7 is recited during the cross-wise incision of the bread, according to the Latin version of Germanus’s commentary, by Anastasius the Librarian (869-870) [6, p. 72]. However, the custom of offering several loaves (from which special portions were extracted)

was not abandoned, and it can be observed in some later Byzantine sources: mss. *Grott. Γ.β. IV*, f. 2^v, *Grott. Γ.β. VII*, 119^r (X c.), the rubrics from the 10th century diataxis used by Leo Tuscan (1173-1174) [7], and the patriarchal letter attributed to Patriarch Cosmas I (1075-1081) or his successor, Eustratius Garidas (1081-1084) addressed to bishop Paul of Gallipoli (XI c.) [8]. These last two witnesses describe the practice of the cross-wise arrangement of the diskoi and the chalices on the holy table. Taft argues that at least five diskoi and four chalices were used for this arrangement to make sense [9]. This could be the origin of today's practice to use five prosphoras at the *Prothesis*.

3. The preparation of the 'merides'

In the ancient Byzantine Euchologia we can find the word *meride* used to designate the first portion of bread, namely, the Lamb (ms. *Grott. Γ.β. II*, XII c. [10]; ms. *Bodl. Auct. E. 5.13*, XII c. [11]; ms. *Barb. gr. 443*, XIII c. [12], etc.). One may ask whether the additional loaves were prepared in the same manner as the first one (the cross-wise cutting, the recitation of *Isaiah* 53.7-8) or in a different one? The sources suggest a lack of uniformity, as the preparation of the additional particles could have been performed: (1) by the simple extraction from the loaves (acc. the otrantan mss. *Barb. Gr. 443* [12] and *Karlsruhe Ettenheimmünster 6* [13] - XIII c.); (2) in the same manner as the Lamb (acc. the correspondence between an orthodox priest and Metropolitan Elias II of Crete, ca. 1111; the anonymous priest describes how some others say that all the offered prosphoras at the *Prothesis*, as many as "three, or ten, or thirty" in the same way as the Lamb [14]) and (3) by pronouncing over them distinct liturgical formulas. In ms. *Sin. Georg. 89* (XI c.) we find for the first time two prayers for commemorating the departed and the living, which were recited after the offering of the first prosphora (and before the mixing of the chalice): "Si defuncto offeret, dicat: Memento, Domine, animae, cum-nomine cuiuscumque voles, et ei-dimitte omnia peccata eius et requiempraesta ei ubi lumen vultus tui. Si rursus vivo offeret, dicat: Memento, Domine, servi tui, cum-nomine, et ei-dimitte omnia peccata eius." (If he [the minister] offers for a deceased, he says: *Remember, O Lord, the soul (of the one you want to commemorate) and forgive all his sins and grant him rest where the light of Your face shines*. If, on the contrary, he offers for a living, he says: *Remember, O Lord, Thy servant [name] and forgive all his sins*.) [15]

No explicit mention of the extraction of *merides* is made, but the fact that these commemorations were recited during the offering of additional loaves can be deduced from the testimony of the deacon Peter, Hartofilax of the Great Church (XI c.), who being asked if it is permitted to celebrate the Eucharist with only one *prosphora* answers: "If there is not a commemoration of a saint or a departed, there is no interdiction" [16]. It is evident that initially a saint was commemorated at the *Prothesis* when the Liturgy was celebrated in his honour.

The *Nomocanon* of Patriarch Nicholas III (1084-1111) describes a more evolved ritual for the preparation of the particles: “The first prosphora is in honour of the Lord. The celebrant must trace the sign of the cross with the lance over the prosphora while reciting the verse; then he pierces with the lance and removes the seal, whether it is square or round, and pronounces the following formula: Behold is sacrificed the Lamb of God, the Son of the Father, who takes away the sin of the world. The second. The priest removes with the lance a small seal (*σφραγιδα μικράν*) and says: Accept, O Lord, this sacrifice through the intercession of the most glorious Lady, the Theotokos, and ever-virgin Mary, for the expiration of the one who offered it. The third: Accept, O Lord, this sacrifice through the intercession of the holy and heavenly powers Michael and Gabriel, and of all the ranks for the expiration of the one who offered it. The fourth: Accept, O Lord, this sacrifice through the intercession of the glorious forerunner, of the holy and all glorious apostles, of the holy prophets, of the holy hierarchs, of saint (N), whose memory the day is dedicated, and of all the saints, for the expiration of the one who offered it. And if other prosphoras are offered, the celebrant says over each, first for the living: Receive, O Lord, this sacrifice for the forgiveness of the one who offered it; and then for the departed: Receive, O Lord, this sacrifice, for the forgiveness of the one who offered it and of those for whom he offered it.” [17]

First of all, from the additional loaves, there are taken out smaller particles (*σφραγιδα μικράν*) than the first one. Secondly, the formula at each commemoration is in fact a prayer of intercession, asking the Lord to receive the sacrifice for the remission of the sins of the one offering the prosphora or for the one in whose behalf it is offered. Probably the origin of these formulas resides in the tendency of the celebrant to add verbal material to the practical act of offering the supplementary loaves, after the model of the first prosphora.

There was however a time when the commemorations were not necessarily linked to the extraction of particles. We find such an example in codex *Vatican Gr. 1554* (Calabria, XII c.) According to this manuscript, after the preparation of the prosphora and the mixing of the chalice, the priest covers the gifts, recites the Prayer of incensation and then “prays for himself and for who he wishes and for all Christians”. Then he recites the Prayer of the *Prothesis* [18].

4. Institutional environment

In his *Response 9* to the Questions of John the Hesychast (ca. 1105), Patriarch Nicholas III states that: “It is fitting to elevate only one prosphora, as everyone does, when the ‘One is holy, one Lord, Jesus Christ’ is proclaimed. The rest of the gifts set out on the altar are blessed by the descent of the Holy Spirit, which we believe happens at this time...for...the fullness of the blessing of the Holy Spirit comes down upon the smallest of the consecrated (i.e. sacrificed/offered) pieces...” [9, p. 219]

Taft [9, p. 220] and Asmus [4, p. 247] argue that the rest of the consecrated particles on the altar are one with the consecrated Lamb, which alone is elevated at the *Sancta sanctis*, by the descent of the Holy Spirit at the Elevation. One may ask if these gifts that are not elevated are the same with the small seals mentioned in the Patriarch's *Nomocanon*? I believe that this is plausible. In *Response 9*, Nicholas III states that "the fullness of the blessing of the Holy Spirit comes down upon the smallest of the offered pieces" (*ἐν τοῖς μικροῖς τμήμασι τοῖς ἱερουργουμένοις*). It is possible that *μικροῖς τμήμασι* may have been used in the same meaning as *σφραγίδα μικρὰν* found in the *Nomocanon* for the particles removed from the additional loaves.

The byzantine canonist Theodore Balsamon († ca. 1195) in his commentary on *canon 8* attributed to Theophilus of Alexandria († 412), which regulated how the remaining prosphoras from the Liturgy should be distributed, states that from the loaves offered at the altar, "particles were extracted for the divine gifts, and the latter were consecrated" (*ἐξ αὐτῶν μερίδες ἐλήφθησαν εἰς τὰ δῶρα, κάκεινα ἡγιάσθησαν*) [9, p. 222]. It is evident that Theodore, when speaking about the particles, refers to a practice from his time, because in the time of Theophilus the whole loaves were still consecrated. As we can see, Theodore does not make a distinction between the particles regarding their Eucharistic nature.

We also have to mention a byzantine liturgical commentary in verse inspired by the *Protheoria* of Nicholas and Theodore of Andida (XI c.), which is of otrantan origin and is dated between the XIIth and the XIIIth century. The passage which is of interest is: "Καὶ κἂν τρεῖς θυσιάζονται καὶ πλεον, ὡς ἐδόκει/ ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς ἄφεσιν ζώντων καὶ τεθνεώτων,/ ἀλλ' ὁμως ἀγιάζονται, καθὼς προεἰπομέν πως,/ καὶ τούτων ἐν συγγίνεται σῶμα τὸ τοῦ Κυρίου" (And although three (prosphoras/particles) are sacrificed and more, as it is thought, for the dismissal of sins for the living and the dead, they are sanctified, as we said, becoming one Body of the Lord) [19].

So, even if more prosphoras are offered for the remission of sins for the living and the departed, they are all consecrated, becoming the holy Body of Christ.

5. Towards a new Theology...

It appears that until the XIIIth centuries all the Eucharistic breads were considered as one sacrifice. Afterwards, this perception had been gradually tainted, most probably because of the verbalization of the preparation of the prosphoras and the allegorization of the rite of the *Prothesis*. From this period we have the interpolated version of the commentary of Germanus I, which describes the Elevation as follows: "Only the divine bead is elevated, because He is the Lord King, and He is the Head, according to the apostle. But the other precious gifts are members of Christ and the Body of Christ, or rather, [members] of the precious Body of Christ God. For in it alone is symbolized and shown the divine and life-giving passion of the one sacrificed for the life of the world, since only the very divine bread is immolated and sacrificed as lamb, but the others of the

divine gifts are not cut cross-wise with the lance, but as members of the body are divided into particles and immolated. Thus that divine bread, participating to the sanctification, communicates also to the other precious gifts, just as it communicates to the chalice [at the commixture] sanctification and grace.” [20]

Taft considers that here a distinction is made between the only consecrated Lamb and the un-consecrated commemorative particles. But what does it mean that the Divine Bread communicates sanctification and grace to the chalice? Maybe the commixture is understood as a confirmation of the consecration of the chalice, or maybe we have here an allusion to the commixture performed at the Liturgy of the Presanctified, since in the past it was considered that the chalice was consecrated during this Liturgy by placing the presanctified particle of the Lamb into the un-consecrated cup [21]. If the same sanctification is communicated to the rest of the gifts, then we can assume that they are also consecrated, by participation or contact.

In the XIVth c. Saint Nicholas Cabasilas seems to preserve the old theology. For him, the offering of the additional particles is a continuation of the preparation of the Lamb: “The priest continues to make the offering. He takes a piece of each of the loaves offered and makes the holy gift. But he does not repeat the same words and actions whereby at the beginning the death of the Lord has already been symbolized, since what has been once said is considered to hold good for the whole service. For the whole of the offertory is made in memory of the Lord, and his death is called to mind throughout. The words which he now says are: “To the glory of the all-holy Mother of God, in honour of such and such a saint, and for the remission of the sins of the living and the dead”. And what does this imply? That the reasons for offering the gifts are these: to give thanks to God, and to make supplication.” [22]

Therefore, by these liturgical formulas the two aspects of the Eucharistic Oblation are expressed: the thanksgiving and the praise, on the one hand, and the supplication, on the other hand.

6. The denial of the Eucharistic nature of the additional particles

Saint Symeon of Thessalonika († 1429) is the first ‘liturgist’ who trenchantly argues against the consecration of the additional particles: “the particles are not transformed into either the Lord’s body or into the bodies of the saints, but they are only gifts and offerings and sacrifices by means of bread in imitation of the Master, and are offered to Him in the name of the saints” [23].

In favour of his opinion, Saint Symeon brings some arguments. Inspired by the Dionysian hierarchical model, Symeon says that the particles placed on the diskos around the Lamb are a symbolic and eschatological image of the Church congregated around the Lamb of God: “But let us see how both through this divine symbol and through the action of the sacred prosthesis we behold Jesus Himself and His Church all as one... For He is in the centre through the bread on the diskos, while his Mother is at his right hand through the particle, and the

angels and saints are to the left; below is the whole pious gathering of those who believe in Him.” [23, p. 231]

He then states that only the Lamb becomes the Body of the Lord because the priest does the mixing of the chalice before offering the rest of the particles and only this bread is offered in His memory: “According to the tradition about this, the priest first offers the bread (i.e. the Lamb) and then the chalice is mixed. Finally, he offers particles to God...[23, p. 159] We say that the particles in memory of the saints and the faithful are not transformed, gathering this from the ancient tradition; for the priest offering the bread (i.e. the Lamb) in the prothesis extracts only it in the commemoration of the Lord.” [23, p. 225]

However, the preparation of the chalice takes place immediately after the offering of the Lamb only beginning with the 13th century, as prescribed by ms. *Athens Ethn. Bibl.* and *Harley 5561*, f. 6^r. Until then, the preparation of the prosphoras is regarded as an integral unit. Moreover, as we already saw, Cabasilas understands the entire *Prothesis* as the commemoration of the Lord’s Passion. Subsequently, Saint Symeon compares the sanctification of the particles, through the union with Christ’s Body and Blood, with the deification of the saints by grace, not by nature [23, p. 229]. Instead, Saint Nicholas Cabasilas argues that: “The Church is represented in the holy mysteries, not in figure only, but as the limbs are represented in the heart, and the branches in the root, and, as our Lord said, the shoots in the vine, For here is no mere sharing of a name, or analogy by resemblance, but an identity of actuality.” [22, p. 91]

Saint Symeon’s mystagogy must have been influenced by the decline in the reception of Holy Communion by the laity. This is why he exaggerates the importance of the commemorations at the *Prothesis*, affirming the sanctification of the faithful through the particles. This seems to encourage the dubious practice of ‘spiritual communion’: “...lying right next to the divine bread as it is being sacrificed in the sacred-service and becomes the body of Christ, the particle offered for someone itself also partakes immediately of His holiness. Placed in the chalice, it is united with His blood. Therefore it passes on the grace to the soul for whom it was offered. A spiritual communion therefore takes place...” [23, p. 161].

Very intriguing is Saint Symeon’s statement that the saints “ascent in worthiness and greater acceptance of divine illumination” through the particles offered in their memory and glory [23, p. 159]. Symeon seems to support the opinion stated by the author of *Protheoria* (XI c.), that the commemoration of the saint represents an intercession for them (*PG* 140, 453-457). But Saint Nicholas Cabasilas clarifies that the reason why we commemorate the saint is to thank God for their grace.

7. The theological approach after Saint Symeon of Thessalonika

In 1574 John Nathanael, the economos of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, published a book, *Ἡ θεία Λειτουργία μετὰ ἐξηγήσεων διαφόρων διδασκάλων* (*The Divine Liturgy with explanations of different masters*), in which he inserted Saint

Symeon's opinions regarding the non-consecration of the particles [24]. Moreover, in the context of the Eucharistic polemics between the Greeks and the Latins in the XVIIth century, Gabriel Severus of Philadelphia supports Saint Symeon's point of view arguing that the priest should not commune the people from the particles [25].

On the opposite, the Latins condemned the Greeks for their teaching. Petrus Arcudius (ca. 1620) argues that the consecration of the particles is demonstrated by the nature and conditions of the sacrifice, by the context of the Liturgy, by the use of the terms *προσφοράς* and *προσφέρειν* which express the idea of sacrifice and by the different purposes of the oblation, namely the thanksgiving and the supplication [26]. Jacob Goar stated that there is no difference in nature between the Lamb and the *merides*, but the plural particles to indicate the various ends for which the sacrifice is being offered: the worshiping, the propitiation, the thanksgiving and the supplication [27]. Moreover, Leon Allatius states that after mixing the particles in the chalice with the Holy Mysteries they become one with the Body and Blood of Christ, and they cannot be distinguished anymore, probably suggesting a consecration by contact of the former [28].

Among the Orthodox, one prominent figure from the XVIIth century, Peter Mohyla, in his *Trebnik* from 1646, admits the possibility of consecrating the *merides*, but, influenced by the Latins, argues that it is necessary that the celebrant has this intention [4, p. 258-260]. Mohyla states that if the particles are not transformed into the Body of Christ, then they cannot be considered as a supplication offering because they remain simple bread and cannot sanctify anyone.

However, Mohyla's point of view did not gain supporters among the Orthodox. Thus, Paisios I, Patriarch of Constantinople (1654), defending Saint Symeon's teaching, forbids the priests to commune the people with the particles, for not falling into idolatry. Moreover, he argues that the reason of placing the particles into the chalice is the remission of sins of those commemorated. This is why some of the priests, when doing this say: "Wash away, O Lord, the sins of them that have been remembered here, by Thy precious Blood, at the prayers of Thy saints" [29].

Another Patriarch of Constantinople, Methodios III (1671-1688) argues that "we do not have the intention to consecrate the particles at the Divine Liturgy,...neither we commune the people from them, but we honour them as a holy bread...and nowise we adore them as the Body of the Lord" [30]. A similar opinion is stated by Nicholas Voulgaris († ca. 1684) in his *Κατήχησις* [31] and Theophilos, bishop of Kampanias (ca. 1749-1795), in *Ταμείον Ορθοδοξία* [32].

The Latins have solved the issue for the Ruthenian Catholics at the Council of Zamosc (1720), where it was decreed that the particles are consecrated during the Liturgy and the priests can commune the people from them [33]. After 36 years, pope Benedict XIV, in his Encyclical promulgated on the 1st of March 1756, addressing the Greek-Catholics stated that the priest at the altar pronounces the words of institution (which are consecratory according to the Latin teaching) over both the larger piece of bread, namely the Lamb, and the particles [34].

8. Conclusions

In the past, there was no artificial distinction between the Lamb and the additional particles for the saints and the faithful; the sacrifice was understood as an integral unit, expressing the two dimensions of the Eucharist: the thanksgiving and the supplication. This understanding of the additional particles was suppressed by Saint Symeon's symbolic vision of the *Prothesis*, who makes a radical distinction between the single consecrated Lamb and the other *merides* that according to him are only blessed.

In my opinion, we cannot ignore the entire liturgical and historical evidence prior to Saint Symeon, according to which at least a part of the Byzantine liturgists and theologians believed that all the bread on the paten, including the particles, were consecrated during the Divine Liturgy, becoming the pure Body of Christ. Therefore, we should reflect again on the purpose and significance of the so-called 'commemorative particles' at the Divine Liturgy.

Although Saint Symeon's mystagogical vision prevailed in the Orthodox Church, probably due to his imposing personality, we cannot affirm that the present teaching regarding the singular consecration of the Lamb is an immutable truth. Based on the evidences provided by this study, to which other arguments may be added by further research, the possibility exists to reconsider this classical vision.

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- [33] J.M. Hanssens, *Institutiones liturgicae de ritibus orientalibus*, vol. II, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome, 1930, 201.
- [34] Benedictus XIV, *Bullarium*, tom. IV, semptibus Bartholomaei Ossni, Venetiis, 1778, 167.