

# Worshipping the Undivided Trinity: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

Written by Robert Miclean

Week 5:     *Worship, Sacrament, and Mystery: Understanding the Sacraments as Encounters with Christ; Living Life Sacramentally; Praying as you Believe*

We concluded last week's class by learning that prayer is vital to the Orthodox way of life. Through prayer, God unites us to Himself in a communion that becomes increasingly more intimate as we are deified. There is, in turn, a very close and reciprocal relationship between prayer and the Sacraments of the Church, particularly the Divine Eucharist. As the Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, Hierotheos, writes, "the more a person prays, the more his thirst for divine Communion increases, and the more he communes of the undefiled Mysteries, the more his thirst and zeal for prayer increases."<sup>1</sup>

Prayer and Sacrament go hand in hand in uniting us to the Holy Trinity. In the Orthodox Church there are seven recognized Sacraments. These seven Sacraments were from the first centuries of the Church recognized as means by which God communicates His deifying grace, His divine energies, that is, Himself, to His Church. But unlike the more rigid Roman Catholic understanding of a fixed seven Sacraments, the Orthodox have always recognized that the Holy Spirit communicates God's grace in both expected *and* unexpected ways.

God communicates His truth, His love, His grace to us in many ways. The Holy Scriptures, God's living Word, can also be a means by which God speaks to us. An icon, as we have seen, communicates divine Truth to us, the images imparting to us a heavenly reality. An icon of Christ, of the Saints, or a scene from the life of Christ can stir the heart and impart God's divine energy to us in order to spur us on in living for Christ. This "divine energy" is God's grace—the grace which also deifies. But we must not think of grace as a "thing", even a "gift", as if it were something separate from God Himself; rather, for the Orthodox, divine energy, or grace, is the very presence of God Himself. A conversation with a Godly spiritual father or mother can also be a means of spiritual strength and theosis. And there are many other ways as well.

At the same time, it is through the Seven Sacraments of Christ's holy Church that God has consistently ministered His grace to His people through the ages. While it is true that God is everywhere present, nevertheless there are moments when His presence is especially intense and most available for spiritual growth in a variety of areas. These moments of intense spiritual encounter, promised by the Lord and authorized by the Lord's body, the Church, are Sacraments.

Among these Sacraments, Holy Baptism and the Divine Eucharist have always been of primary importance as the two Sacraments ordained by our Lord Himself. The other five are

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *The Mind of the Orthodox Church* (Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2000), 137.

Holy Chrismation, which immediately follows Baptism, or in the case of converts, becomes the initiation rite of the Church, Confession, Holy Unction, which involves anointing with sacramentally consecrated holy oil, Holy Matrimony, and Ordination. Not everyone is called to experience all seven of these Sacraments, just as not all men are called to become priests and thereby spiritual fathers.

## *Holy Baptism*

Just as Christ begins *His ministry* with baptism, so too it is normative in the Church that we begin our new lives as Christians by following our Savior into the waters of Baptism. St. Gregory the Theologian (4<sup>th</sup> century) admonishes us to “*travel without fault as a disciple of Christ through every stage and faculty of His life... (and) share in His death and burial gladly, that you may rise with Him, and be glorified with Him and reign with Him.*” As we follow Christ into Baptism and new life in Him, we begin this journey toward deification/theosis of which St. Gregory speaks.

It has always been the conviction of the Orthodox Church that when we receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism a great and sacred mystery happens: *We die and are buried with Christ*. Just as He died and was buried for three days before His glorious resurrection, so too we experience through the Mystery of Holy Baptism a spiritual death and resurrection.

The book of Romans describes it this way, "Therefore, we were buried with Him through Baptism into death that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Rom. 6:3-11).

*How is this possible?* The person being baptized passes into the figurative ‘death’ of water three times. He ‘rises again’ each time in the name of the Holy Trinity. Through the Sacrament, God channels the grace of His Holy Spirit to us and we begin a *new* life. This is what Jesus means when He says to Nicodemus, “I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and Chrismation which follows God is the primary actor and therefore the Church has never held that one must be an “adult believer” in order to be baptized, as some neo-Protestants maintain. Such teaching is at best 200 years old. This is not in accordance with the earliest of the Church’s Tradition in which we see that both infants and adults were baptized, as we can see by the liturgical services for Baptism from the first centuries of the Church and as early Church iconography also shows (see a third century wall painting from the Catacombs in Rome in class).

When infants are baptized, the parents and godparents entrust the child to God, that He may begin the work of salvation in the child’s life. *God through the power of the Holy Spirit* communicates through Baptism forgiveness of sin *not* because of something we have done, but because of God’s great love for us. As it is stated in Titus 3:4-5, “When the kindness and the

love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, wrote to his disciples in the 4th century, "you were led by the hand to the holy pool of divine baptism... and each of you was asked if he believed in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. And you made that saving confession, you descended into the water and came up again three times. In the very same moment you died and were born.” What St. Cyril is saying is that through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism we are made spiritually into a new person—one who is no longer living for SIN, but for CHRIST!

Accordingly, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism entails two spiritual ‘deaths’ as those striving to live for and in Christ. In the *first* spiritual ‘death’, which happens at the moment of Baptism, we are united with Christ, adopted as His children—first in His death and *then* to new life by His resurrection.

The *second* spiritual ‘death’ is *enabled* by Baptism and the sacramental life of the Church and is continual *throughout our lives*. Certainly as with our entire faith journey, we must cooperate with God and live out the profession of the Faith. This is true for all the baptized. The second ‘death’ then is a daily saying “*No!*” to sin and “*Yes!*” to following Christ. This is how we ‘live out’ our Baptismal covenant. God assists us by His grace, which is imparted through the other Sacraments He has given to us through His Church, primarily the Sacraments of Confession and the Divine Eucharist. These Sacraments, along with the worship of the Church, and all the other means by which God communicates His grace to us, strengthen us and equip us so that we may live out our Baptismal promises.

The ancient Orthodox prayer in the liturgy for Holy Baptism reads, “O Master, Lord our God, call thy servant, \_\_\_\_\_, to thy holy Illumination, and grant unto him that great grace of thy holy Baptism. Put off from him the old man, and renew him unto life everlasting; and fill him with the power of thy Holy Spirit, in the unity of thy Christ: that he may be no more a child of the body (the flesh), but a child of thy kingdom. Through the good will and grace of thine Only-begotten Son, with whom thou art blessed, together with thy most holy, and good, and life-giving Spirit: now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen (from the Orthodox Service Book, p. 151).

Since the first centuries of the Church, Baptism is followed immediately by the Sacrament called Chrismation, or holy anointing, by which the newly baptized is “sealed” with the Holy Spirit. As mentioned earlier, the early third-century *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus reveals the Jewish continuity in early Christian worship and the Sacramental life of the Church. His liturgical rites are heavily laden with Paschal themes. The “sealing” of the body at Chrismation, for instance, is linked with Jewish circumcision as the fulfillment of the “seal” of the Old Covenant.<sup>2</sup> This practice of “sealing” the newly baptized with holy oil is still universally practiced in the Orthodox Church today in direct continuity with the early Church and the Church’s roots in Judaism and in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

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<sup>2</sup> The Rev. Gregory Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* (SPCK: London, 1968), p. xl.

Since the purpose of our new life in Christ as Christians is *theosis* (deification), that is, ever closer union and communion with the Holy Trinity, Baptism is for the Orthodox in this sense the *beginning* of our eternal life. By it we are welcomed into the fellowship of Christ's Body, the Church. We are made ready to receive the Lord's Body and Blood in the Eucharist and begin our journey to attain to the promises of Christ. In effect, *we begin to prepare for eternity with God.*

### *The Divine Eucharist*

As 2<sup>nd</sup> century St. Ignatius explains, the Eucharist unites us with Christ in His death and resurrection. As we are deified, we are being joined to Christ. Our humanity is being interpenetrated with the energies and likeness of God through our relationship to Christ's glorified flesh. When we partake of the Eucharist, we are being nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ and thereby partake of God's grace.<sup>3</sup> This grace in turn enables us to serve Him and glorify Him in and through our lives.

In the Early Church as in the Orthodox Church today, the Eucharist, from the Greek word for 'thanksgiving,' is seen as a spiritual joining with Christ in the benefits of His one and only passion, a taste of the *eschaton*—the Messianic banquet we will enjoy with all the Saints when we are with Him in His kingdom.<sup>4</sup> As writer and scholar Evelyn Underhill articulates it: "For the Orthodox today as for the Christians of the Early Church, the Eucharist embodies a "sacred drama," an act which in its essence takes place outside time...."<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of the Divine Liturgy, another name for the Eucharistic service in the Orthodox Church, time in any temporal sense fades away. At the beginning of the service the Deacon proclaims to the priest: "*It is time (Gk., kairos) for the Lord to act!*" In the Divine Liturgy as with the other Sacraments of Christ's Church, God is the main actor. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the common elements of bread and wine will be transformed into the precious Body and Blood of our Lord.

Regarding Christ's presence in the Eucharist, among Christians in the Early Church there was no question that a mystical change was happening as the bread and wine were being consecrated. They consistently refer to Jesus' own words that the bread and the wine are His true "body and blood." In fact it is this claim, which raised the ire of the Jews to the boiling point, when in John 6, Jesus says to them:

*Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him* (John 6:53-56)

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<sup>3</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), p. 561.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*, p. 263.

The Greek word for “eat” used here, τρώω (*trogo*) occurs only six times in the Greek New Testament and literally means “to munch or gnaw.” There is little doubt that Jesus was asserting here the reality of the mystical presence of His body and blood in the Eucharist. That the first Christians understood the Eucharist in such terms in unmistakable. St. Paul, for one, writes in I Cor. 11:29, saying with regard to the presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist: “... Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” It is for this reason that we are invited and, if need be, *urged* to examine our hearts before we receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In the Orthodox Church, receiving Holy Communion is not a ‘right’ but a *privilege* granted by Christ to His Body, the Church. No one has a ‘right’ to receive the Divine Eucharist. It is a gift given by the Lord to His Church.

Likewise, Theodore of Mopsuestia writes in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century regarding Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew 26:26, saying: “He did not say, ‘this is the *symbol* of my body and blood’; but ‘this *is* my body, and this is my blood,’ teaching us not to see the nature of the object, for, in becoming Eucharist, the objects are changed into the body and blood of Christ” [emphasis added].<sup>6</sup> The Orthodox have always taken Jesus and His Apostles at their word. The Eucharist is no exception.

It must also be said, however, that the Orthodox have never experienced anything close to what is called the Scholastic movement in the West, which greatly influenced Roman Catholic theology beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and contributed later to the Enlightenment and the rationalization of Western thought. There is therefore no Orthodox equivalent to the Roman Catholic belief in Transubstantiation, which attempts to explain in philosophical categories *how* the common elements of bread and wine become for God’s people the Body and Blood of Christ. Transubstantiation, against which the Reformers of the Reformation vociferously reacted, attempts to make cerebral what is and always has been a Divine Mystery. For Orthodox Christians much more important than the question of *how* the Eucharist becomes Christ’s Body and Blood, are the effects which the Eucharist has on the communicant, uniting us with the Holy Trinity and thereby deifying our souls and bodies.

Orthodox Christians have always held that at the moment of consecration there is a ‘*re-calling*’ or ‘*re-presenting*’ before God of Christ’s “once-and-for-all” sacrifice on the cross, the benefits of which are made present to us in the Eucharist by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, which originates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, continues to be used in the Orthodox Church today and conveys this eternal timelessness of the Eucharist.

As with all Orthodox teaching, the Eucharistic theology of the Church is revealed in the prayers of the Church. Thus, the priest prays,

Having in remembrance, therefore, this saving commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the cross, the grave, the third-day resurrection, the ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand, and the second and glorious coming...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Eastern Orthodox Theology, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> *The Liturgikon: The Book of Divine Services for the Priest and Deacon* (Antakya Press, 1994), p. 287.

God is not bound by the limits of human time. In God's economy even the Second Coming is already a reality celebrated in the triumph of the Eucharistic feast.

In continuity with the early church Orthodox Christians today understand in the Eucharist a participation in the worship of heaven—eternal worship. The angels, who are always present in the church, are present in a special way as the Divine Liturgy is being celebrated. We acknowledge their presence as we sing the “Cherubic Hymn”:

*"We, who mystically represent the Cherubim, and who sing the thrice-holy hymn to the Life-creating Trinity, let us now lay aside all earthly care: that we may receive the King of all, Who comes invisibly upborne by the Angelic Hosts...."*

The angels too are joined by the Saints who have gone before us, who are already worshipping the life-creating Trinity in heaven, and who are *re-presented* in their glorified state through the icons that surround the worshippers on earth (see picture of the inside of an Orthodox church).

Could there be any greater privilege than to partake of and be nourished by the same mystical supper by which He strengthened His Apostles? The Eucharist is the supreme gift of God to His Church and the true and ongoing presence of Christ in the midst of His Church. It is also the primary means by which God communicates His grace to the Church and deifies His people. In the words of Saint Ignatius, the fourth bishop of Antioch, the Eucharist is “the medicine of immortality, the antidote that we should not die, but live forever in Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

Given the significance of the Eucharist for the Church, Orthodox Christians take great pains to prepare themselves spiritually and physically to receive the Divine Eucharist. Because the Eucharist is seen as both spiritual *and* physical ‘medicine,’ Orthodox Christians prepare for both, refraining from food and water prior to receiving Holy Communion so that the ‘first’ food and drink the communicant receives on the Lord’s Day is the Lord’s Body and Blood, which nourishes both soul and body.

Additionally, Orthodox Christians pray certain prayers from the Fathers of the Church in preparation. And these prayers remind us of the great gift we are about to receive from God and the correct attitude we should have before partaking of the Sacrament. The worship of the Church, the readings from the Holy Scriptures, the ancient hymns of the Church, all of which Orthodox Christians believe to be divinely inspired, contribute greatly to our further preparation to receive the Divine Mystery of the Eucharist.

Also, because Christ is one, the early Church was insistent that a single Eucharistic fellowship be maintained among Orthodox communicants. Thus St. Ignatius, writing in 106 A.D., admonishes his flock, “Observe a single Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one cup of His blood that makes us one, and one altar” (Letter to the Phil., ch.

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<sup>8</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* from Fr. Michel Najim and T.L. Frazier, *Understanding The Orthodox Liturgy* (Saugus, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995), 146.

4).<sup>9</sup> Here we see too in Ignatius' words his concern that the growing number of apostate groups competing against the Apostolic Church and teaching heresy are mimicking the Eucharist of the one true Church and maintaining that they too possess the Apostolic Faith and are themselves "the Church." The Eucharist, then as now, defined what it means to be in communion with one another and to be a full member of the Orthodox Church.

Then as now, Orthodox Christians see in the Holy Communion the ultimate measure of unity in the Faith. To commune with other Orthodox Christians unites the Body in one fellowship, one family of Faith. Sharing in the Mystical Supper, the Eucharist, means that we 'share all things in common.' The Eucharist is seen as a sharing in the *koinonia* (fellowship) that only those in full doctrinal agreement can share. For this reason, Orthodox Christians do not partake of Communion in other churches and do not permit other Christians, who are not Orthodox, to partake of the Eucharist in the Orthodox Church. At the same time, Orthodox Christians are urged daily in the prayers of the Church to beseech the Lord for the unity of all Christians. But again, this unity cannot be institutional or outward unity, but must be an *organic* unity, characterized by unity in the Truth of the Orthodox Faith.

## *Confession*

The Sacrament of Confession, or holy Repentance, is a vital preparation for Holy Communion in the Orthodox Church. There are *many* misconceptions in the Protestant world about Confession. For some, the word conjures up images of the old Medieval Roman Catholic confessional boxes and of a very impersonal encounter with a priest you can't even see.

The reality is that Confession in the Orthodox Church is grounded in the Holy Scriptures and the practice of the Church through the centuries. In I John 1:9 we are promised that "if we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." St. James writes in his Epistle, "Confess your trespasses to one another" (James 5:16). Most significantly, Jesus Himself empowered His Apostles and their successors to forgive sins as we read in both the Gospel of John and Matthew: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23).

Jesus 'appointed,' that is, ordained the Apostles. And we are reminded throughout the Holy Scriptures by Jesus and the Apostles themselves that the power that they wield on behalf of Christ is not from them but from the Holy Spirit, from God (e.g., II Cor. 4:7). St. Paul, in turn, uses similar language with his spiritual son Titus while instructing him to "appoint" (literally, 'lay hands on' or 'ordain') presbyters/priests "in every city" (Titus 1:5). The Deacon, Priest, and Bishop serve at the behest of God. It is Christ's Church. The charism imparted to them for exercising their ministry comes from the grace of the Holy Spirit through the Sacrament of Ordination, literally, "the laying on of hands" by one of the successors to the Apostles.

Typically the parish priest then acts as Christ's representative, a visible 'icon' of Christ to the penitent, assuring him or her of the reality of God's promised love and forgiveness for all his

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

or her sins. He kneels or stands beside the penitent as he or she faces the icon of Christ, patiently and lovingly imparting his council to his spiritual children. The priest who witnesses one's confession truly is a "spiritual father" to the penitent, guiding his child, God's child, to look deeper into his or her own soul and root out the footholds of sin and spiritual sickness. Then after telling God all his or her sins and failures, the glorious words of freedom are heard which announce Christ's promise of forgiveness of all one's sins.<sup>10</sup> The penitent resolves to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

Thus Confession becomes a tremendous source of God's healing for the Body of Christ. It is perhaps easy to criticize such an action from outside of the Orthodox Church, but as with all the Sacraments, Confession works as strong spiritual medicine in healing us from our sickness.

In some of the sister churches of the Orthodox Church, it is customary for the communicant to make his or her confession every time before receiving the Eucharist. Traditionally, however, weekly Communion makes Confession on such a constant basis rather impracticable. Rather, Confession is treated as a matter between spiritual father and spiritual son or daughter. Important is that the communicant be in active fellowship with his or her spiritual father. The frequency of Confession is then decided between the penitent and his or her spiritual father, the priest; it is not for others to judge. Some wish to receive the healing and grace of the Sacrament of Repentance more often than others. The point is that the Body of Christ is an organism made up of many members with differing needs. It is the priest's responsibilities to know the spiritual state of all his spiritual children. After all, as 'shepherd' he bears the responsibility for their souls before God.

The prayers which the priest says at the end of Confession sum up the priest's role in conveying God's forgiveness of the penitent:

My spiritual child, who hast confessed to my humble self, I, humble and a sinner, have not power on earth to forgive sins, but God alone; yet through that divinely spoken word which came to the Apostles after the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted, and whosoever sins we retain, they are retained, we too are emboldened to say: Whatsoever thou hast said to my most humble self, and whatsoever thou hast not succeeded in saying, either through ignorance, or through forgetfulness, whatever it may be: God forgive thee in this present world, and in that which is to come (from "the Order of Confession").

### *Conclusion:*

The mission of the Orthodox Church in the world begins and ends with Christ and His love for the world. The Eucharist is the memorial of His passion on behalf of the world and expresses Christ's continued presence in His Church. Next week, in the final lesson of this

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<sup>10</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1993), 571.

course, we will focus on the mission of the Orthodox Church in the world today and also how one lives the Orthodox life on a daily basis. I will conclude this week's lecture with the words of the late Orthodox theologian Fr. Alexander Schmemmann (memory eternal):

It is the very joy of the Kingdom that makes us *remember* the world and pray for it. It is the very communion with the Holy Spirit that enables us to love the world with the love of Christ... Intercession begins here, in the glory of the messianic banquet, and this is the only true beginning for the Church's mission. It is when, "having put aside all earthly care," we seem to have left this world, that we, in fact, recover it in all its reality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 44f.