

Participating in the Eucharist: A Way of Life or a Social Occasion?

by Dr. Michael Massouh

For as long as I can remember I have been told to go to Church. But the reasons for attendance have seldom been convincing. Because most of us share this ambivalence, I would like to tell you about a recent experience that convinces me that church going is more than a nice social occasion.

By the grace of God, from whom all blessings flow, I gained an insight when I was asked by my parish's adult education Class to review and to study the Divine Liturgy. The Holy Spirit must indeed work in strange ways because my class contains more than its share of doubting Thomases.

Put succinctly, what we learned was that the Divine Liturgy provides the most practical vehicle to be in the presence of God, to participate with others in corporate worship, and to receive food and sustenance for our spiritual journey in life.

PRESENCE OF GOD

"One is known by the company one keeps." Well, associating with God, His angels, and the Saints each Sunday puts one in highly select company. How does this happen? Are God, His angels, and the saints present at the Liturgy? The Church teaches and, more importantly, experiences the presence of Christ whenever two or three are gathered in His name. For those doubting Thomases who argue that church attendance is not important, that one can commune with God anywhere and anytime, the answer is yes, one can. Indeed, Christ answered a querulous pharisee by saying go into one's closet and in secret pray to God. He said this to teach that God welcomes a humble soul, not one who prays openly and proudly so that all may see and comment. Those pharisees were hypocrites. So, yes, private prayers are necessary.

But private prayers are merely one side of the coin. Corporate prayer, that is, when a community of believers gather to pray, is the other side of the coin. The best expression of corporate prayer is the Eucharist, the special service Christ Himself instituted at the Last Supper for us to remember Him.

At the high point of the Eucharistic service we ask the Holy Spirit — the third person of the Trinity and the One Christ said He would send at Pentecost — to change the bread and wine into the blood and body of Christ. Wherever the Holy Spirit is and wherever Christ is so also God the Father is. So, at the Divine Liturgy the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are with us.

In addition to the Trinity participating with us at the Liturgy, so also are the Angels. How do we know there are Angels?

There are several references to angels in the Bible both in the Old and New Testaments. One of the most important prophets, Isaiah, describes his glimpse of paradise as where the angels are continually singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory," (Isaiah 6:3). It is from this glimpse that we sing the "Holy, holy, holy" hymn at each Divine Liturgy to accompany the angels. Furthermore, at baptism each of us is assigned a radiant Angel to deliver us from every snare of the adversary, and to protect us from demons and evil visions. Thus, wherever we go we are not alone. We bring our guardian angel with us to the Divine Liturgy.

And what about the saints? The Church teaches that the Body of Christ is composed of both a Church Militant (those of us living today) and a Church Triumphant (those who have departed this earthly life). The icons of some members of the Church Triumphant — the saints — are placed on the iconostasis and other walls of the Church building reminding us of their lives. We greet them when we enter the Church building and ask them to pray for us and to intercede with Christ for us. At the Prothesis while the priest prepares the gifts of bread and wine he remembers them as well as all members of the parish both living and dead for whom prayers are offered. He does this by placing on the Diskos a piece of bread for each person remembered. At the time of the Great Entrance and also just before communion we ask God to remember the "Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Preachers, Evangelists, Martyrs, Confessors, Ascetics, and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith. . . the Theotokos. . . John the Baptist . . . and all the Saints." At the Divine Liturgy then there are more souls there than those we see in the pews, the altar, and the choir loft.

The Divine Liturgy is the meeting ground then where God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, His Blessed Mother, His Angels, the Saints, and we mortals gather to glorify God, to thank Him, and to commune with Him with one heart and with one mind. We are creating with God's Grace a foretaste of the Kingdom of God right here, right now.

PARTICIPATION

Thus, what we learn and tentatively begin to experience is, to use a current expression, awesome. The Divine Liturgy is a place to go to participate, not to watch. It's a place to go to work out one's faith with others who share the same heart and the same mind. It's interesting to learn that the word "liturgy" or "**leitourgia**" in Greek comes from two Greek words that mean the work of the people, or a public service: **leitōs** (people) and **ergon** (work). Worship is a work experience. Just as when one

goes to a health club one gets more out of it if one works out, so too with the leitourgia, one gets more out of it if one works at worship or works out.

Going to a health club to work out on the exercise machines makes one fitter than if one goes to watch others working out. Since not everyone is at the same stage of physical fitness, the machines are adjustable to allow each person to progress in fitness from whatever level the instructor finds him.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Similarly in our prayer and spiritual life, each one of us is at a different functioning level. But the good news is that at whatever point we find ourselves we can improve. We are all on a path to meet the Lord on Judgement Day. Participating in the Divine Liturgy allows us to exercise our spiritual muscles, to clear the cobwebs of worldly values from our minds, and to focus our attention and energy on God. The Church teaches that each one of us journeys along a spiritual road until one becomes Christlike. There is even a Greek word for it: theosis. Orthodox Christianity teaches that each baptized soul can indeed become transfigured, as Christ was on Mount Tabor and as some saints have been, and thus become God-like. Christ became Man so that by God's grace man could become like God. A worthy goal? Yes.

Should one attempt the goal? I think so. Of course, each one of us possesses a will to decide, and some are free to choose not to attempt the goal. In fact, that is one of the beauties of Christianity. There is nothing that can convince a person to believe in Christ. Likewise, there is nothing that can convince a person not to believe in Christ. Each person has to make the choice himself and the decision will come at different times for different people.

It's like learning how to swim. One's parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, brothers, and sisters may all know how to swim, and each of them can instruct one in the techniques of swimming. But if one does not "take the plunge" and do it himself, one will never be able to swim. If one does not actively participate in private and corporate worship an important dimension of life will be neglected. One's spiritual life will atrophy and something special will be missing from one's life.

To continue the swimming analogy, one may jump in but unless one practices, and works out at floating, breathing, stroking, etcetera, one is not a swimmer. One can test the waters in one's youth and not learn. One can try again in middle age, or again in old age. Some come to Christ at the first hour, some not until the 6th, some not until the 9th, and, yes, some not until the 11th hour. But that's all right — it's another thing that makes Christianity realistic and another thing I like about it.

So far, I have made a case for participating in the Divine Liturgy to prepare ourselves for the journey on the spiritual road to **theosis**. But what are the

alternatives of not accepting the goal of spiritual growth to become Christlike? Hell fire and brimstone? Well, that's what I had heard but it did not sound convincing. Life is full of good things to be enjoyed. But the longer one lives and the more one experiences of this life, the more one realizes that the things of this world are not what they are cracked up to be. Position, fame, fortune, possessions in and of themselves are O.K. But the struggle to get them and the greater struggle to maintain them begs the questions: Am I enjoying life? Are the headaches and heartaches worth it? Is there something missing? What happens when I die?

Even before one is at death's door then, probing questions surface. Nurturing one's spiritual life does have beneficial consequences as the Church fathers and mothers have always taught. Moreover, recent medical and psychological studies suggest that modern man has become so liberated that he now suffers from loneliness and the loss of the joys and comforts of community. The experts making these studies are rediscovering the medical and psychological benefits of nurturing one's spiritual life.

Well, as I said, each one has to make the choice himself based upon his own life experiences and his own timing. But, should one make the choice to journey on the spiritual road, the Divine Liturgy is a welcome event.

To put it another way, let us say that one got to a position of wondering about the meaning of life and there was no Divine Liturgy. Life, indeed, would be hopeless. There would be the Law and the Prophets, but no Christ, no victory over death. Man on earth and God in heaven. No way to bridge the gap between mortality and immortality.

Well, thank God that He sent His Only Begotten Son; thank Him again for dying for us; for giving us a way to remember Him; and for a way to become immortal. Thank Him, in other words, for the Divine Liturgy. For it is in each Eucharistic Service that we can corporately ascend to heaven, commune with God, and receive the encouragement to continue on our spiritual journey.

So, yes, the Divine Liturgy is more than a nice social exercise. It is awesome. It is a way of life.

Dr. Massouh is a member of St. George Cathedral of Worcester, MA, where he teaches the weekly adult religious education class.

*From [Word Magazine](#)
Publication of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
June 1987
pp. 8-9*