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The Holy Eucharist - Nourishment for the Eternal Life, and the Power to surrender one's entire Life to God

Abstract

The lives of the saints clearly prove that the Holy Eucharist not only gives the Christians the power to die to sin and completely surrender to God, but also empowers them to live the life of Christ authentically in their bodies, and to probe the truthfulness of their total self-sacrifice by welcoming real death as a gift offered to the Father, in the image of the Saviour's sacrifice. Hence, those who choose to suffer mystical death through the Holy Mysteries, or real death through martyrdom, are rewarded with insight into the deep and profound meaning of the Holy Eucharist. They are "always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in their body" (2 Cor. 4, 10), as Saint Apostle Paul writes. The lives of the saints show that all Christians are called to bear witness, in front of the whole world, for the mystical reality of the Holy Communion, as a means for men to



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sample and engage the power of Christ's humanity, so as to put an end to all of their selfish behaviours and start self-sacrificing their lives to the Father, just as the Saviour did.

Keywords

Holy Liturgy, martyrdom, sacrifice, Holy Eucharist, Holy Trinity

1 Introduction

After Christ's Resurrection and Ascension to Heaven, any meeting with Him happens in a way entirely new and mysterious, by way of the visible matter inside the Church. "Instead of Christ's corporeal being, the world now fully enjoys His spiritual presence, which is ready to be experienced through personal faith and participation in the Holy Mysteries, and this is a presence evermore intense than the former, for it is entirely rooted in the Holy Spirit"¹.

According to Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae "Christ dwells with us and we feel the mystery of His presence, henceforward we meet with Him within ourselves. The Son of God had to immerse Himself into the human nature. He had to die and rise again, so we might submerge into the Baptismal waters and thus fully welcome Him inside our beings, or better yet, so that we might fully immerse ourselves into His divine life, and partake of all the gifts His human nature acquired through His Passions and Resurrection."²

¹ Odo Casel, *Mysteriengegenwart*, în „Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft”, VIII, 1955, pp. 154-155.

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă/Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (following: TDO/ODT), vol. III, Bucharest, Publishing House:

The union between man and God taking place inside the Church reaches its peak intensity in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. Christ is there, mystically re-birthing the man through Baptism, granting him the power to grow in the new life through Chrismation, and nourishing him through His Body and Blood; therefore, He sows in him the power to surrender his entire existence to God only to have it returned to him filled with His divine life³. Christ wants to fulfil His entire economy of salvation by abiding in those who believe in Him, as the only efficient way in which He can give His whole, gift-laden life to all men. In doing this, He lends the dynamism of His sacrificial state to their bodies and then extends it into their souls, and thus He helps them continually die to sin and rise with Him, in a perpetually intense attempt of offering their whole lives to God. The lives of the saints clearly prove that the Holy Eucharist not only gives the Christians the power to die to sin and completely surrender to God, but also empowers them to live the life of Christ authentically in their bodies, and to probe the truthfulness of their total self-sacrifice by welcoming real death as a gift offered to the Father, just as the Saviour did. Hence, the lives of those who chose to suffer mystical death through the Holy Mysteries, or real death through martyrdom, are rewarded with insight into the deep and profound meaning of the Holy Eucharist. They are always carrying about in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in their bodies (2 Cor. 4, 10), as Saint Apostle Paul writes. The lives of the saints show that all Christians are called to witness in front of the whole world for the mystical reality of the Holy Communion, as a means for men to sample and engage the power of Christ's humanity, so as to put an end to all of their

Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2003, pp. 43-44.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

selfish behaviours and start self-sacrificing their lives to the Father, just as the Saviour did.

The sacrificed lives of the martyrs represent the essence of the Holy Eucharist revealed to men. Their death proves to all that the mystical truth ensconced in the sacramental life of the Church is a living force that crushes death, it is the dynamism of the Saviour's perpetual state of sacrifice, and ultimately it is the marriage between God's eternal love and the love of the man who has completely surrendered himself to God.

The Synaxaria record the lives of those Christians who sought to meet God and to unite with Him both through the Holy Mysteries, and through their ethically ascetical lives. In the Holy Eucharist, they sensed they were united with the God of selfless love, Who gives His Own Body and Blood as nourishment to all, so that all might be filled with His divine love. Then they recognised, in this mystical and ineffable union, a wondrous gift exchange: Christ descends and gives the man all the love and holiness of His deified human Body, and the man responds to this selfless love by sacrificing his own being.

When speaking about this mystical meeting, which is actually the union between man and God, it is necessary to indicate who, in fact, is He Who comes to unite Himself with the human soul and body, what does He give to the man through this union, what is the man expected to do with the gifts thus received, and how these gifts bring forth fruit in the life of the Church.

2 Jesus Christ, Eternal Son of the Father, born into this world in order to restore the man to the communion of consummate love within the Holy Trinity

The selfless, generous, and disinterested love of the Holy Trinity, which the Godhead wanted to plant in and communicate to all rational created beings, is the principle, the foundation, and the purpose of the entire economy of salvation. Having been created in the image of God and meant to attain

perfection as a son of His by grace, through his sampling of the eternal self-sacrificing love of the Holy Trinity, the man has been given the mission to impregnate his whole being with this kind of love, and therefore to gather the whole cosmos around himself and return it, in this love-laden state, to its Creator, thus becoming a mediator between created and uncreated, heaven and earth, paradise and the world he lives in, and between man and woman⁴.

However, the fall into sin has brought about a deviation of the man from this synthesizing mission, and he is now bereft of the communion of selfless love that is within the Holy Trinity. The return to the joy of this communion was accomplished through the Incarnation, Sacrifice and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Who emerged as the eternal High Priest, the perpetual Oblation, and the consummate and sempiternal Altar. He then entered the Heavenly Tabernacle, and went "behind the veil" (Hebrews 6,19), where He brought Himself as a pure, sweet incensed Sacrifice to the Father, and there He remains forever, celebrating a never-ceasing Liturgy.

This state of continual sacrifice is the heavenly foundation to any sacramental act that is performed via sensible means within the Church, for Christ offers Himself in this state to all who wish to draw near Him through the Holy Mysteries. Christ's Person entering the union with the human soul bears the marks of His sacrifice. This state of sacrifice is what He wishes to impress upon all the faithful, because no one can come before God without it, for this state is the opposite of selfishness. Solely a pure sacrifice, devoid of any egotism, gives men the power to come before God, and such a pure sacrifice could not be rendered except by the Son of God incarnate. And

⁴ Saint Maximos the Confessor, *Answers to Thalassios 1, 20, 22, 42, 49*, in "Philokalia", vol. III, Bucharest, Harisma Publishing House, 1994, pp. 16-20; pp. 59-62; pp. 69-76; pp. 146-149; pp. 179-195.

it is only in union with Him that the faithful can bring themselves as pure sacrifices to the Lord⁵.

2.1 Jesus Christ, the substance of the consummate offering

In the Old Testament, the faithful used to offer God animals, and fruits of the earth and of their own labour, by putting before Him as sacrifice the divine gift that yielded in their own gift. The gifts were not mere expiatory substitutes of those who would bring them, but they were a visible sign of the persons' self-giving and self-sacrificing, which was still unconsummated and incomplete, for people could not completely overcome egotism through them alone.⁶

The consummate sacrifice would later be brought by Christ, the complete offering being His very own Person. Father Dumitru Stăniloae writes that His Sacrifice "is a human person of an infinite value, for this human person is also a divine Person"⁷, and it is only His sacrifice that is pleasant in the eyes of the Father, because it is holy, pure, unblemished and without sin.

Christ is the true Sacrifice, man's only gateway back into the vast life of love communion within the Holy Trinity. He entered the Holy of Holies from above, and not with a sacrifice that is detached from Him, shedding not the blood of bulls or calves, but His Own precious blood, an offering far more worthy than any other sacrifice ever brought by a man. There is no value in the animal that is brought as sacrifice, for the animal does not

⁵ Idem, Introduction to Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Închinarea și slujirea în Duh și Adevăr /Adoration in Spirit and in Truth* (following: *Închinarea și slujirea.../Adoration in Spirit...*), in "Părinți și scriitori bisericești"/ECF???, vol. 38, Bucharest, Publishing House: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1991, p. 9.

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină/Eucharist and Christian love* (following: *Legătura dintre Euharistie.../Eucharist and...*), in "Studii Teologice"/"Theological Studies", no.1-2/1965, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

consciously experience the pain of shedding its blood like the incarnate Son does. Father Dumitru Stăniloae says:

“It was not the blood itself that washed men's sins away, but what Christ experienced while shedding it and that stirred Father's boundless mercy. And it also stirred the love for His Son, Who gave Himself to the Father as a human oblation that culminated in His shedding the blood for us and instead of us. This should lead us to understand the great value the Father assigned to the Son, Who suffered death on the Cross so that we might be granted mercy. If even an ordinary man experiences the pain of sacrifice with his whole being, when he sheds his blood for another, even more so does Christ feel this pain in a perpetual manner”⁸.

The Saviour's sacrifice is unique and of maximum efficiency, for Christ also presented Himself as a complete man to the Father, bringing neither impersonal gifts, nor other people as offering (like the pagans did), but rather He gave Himself for others. Hence, He became the supreme Priest or the High Priest par excellence, one who could graft the vastness of the divine love onto His feeling of solidarity with His fellow men, thus dying only to sanctify Himself and elevate all who believe in Him before the Father⁹. “Surrendering one's own self to God means infinitely more than surrendering one's possessions - the same great theologian notes in one of his comments to Saint Cyril of Alexandria's *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*. By sacrificing one's possessions, one preserves oneself through a selfish care that is too poorly lessened. Only Christ brought Himself as a complete sacrifice. And only by attaching ourselves to Him Who brought such a sacrifice, can we also bring ourselves as living sacrifices, by renouncing the false pleasures of egoistic passions. It is a different way of annihilating our selfishness, or

⁸ Sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei, *Închinarea și slujirea...*, note 338, p. 309.

⁹ *Ibidem*, note 126, p. 107.

maybe our own selves, for we cease living for ourselves and start living for God, by fulfilling His will that sanctifies us.”¹⁰ What Christ brings is a living sacrifice, full of life because it is not “something” one brings as an exchange gift, but rather it is “Someone”, Who is a price and an offering in and of Himself, Who has an inherent supreme value, by that that He becomes the source of the sweet incense of sacrifice, which penetrates all those who abide in Him and engages them toward a state of sacrifice:

“The burnt offerings of animals were completely consumed by the holy and unextinguished fire, not an organ was spared, but each little part and limb would ascend to God, as a sweet incensed aroma. And those who were slain in order to be brought as a sacrifice for salvation would go through a partial sanctification... It was thus meet that only Christ should bring Himself as a complete burnt offering. For He is truly whole and holy, completely sweet incensed and sanctified. In the meantime, the lack of a thorough holiness and overall cleanness is inevitable in us, for we are also somewhat corrupted by sin”¹¹.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, note 458, p. 400.

¹¹ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, PG 68, Paris: Migne, 1857-1866, col. 709B: “Τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὀλοκαυτώματα τῶν ζώων ὅλα δι’ ὅλων, ἱερῶ καὶ ἀσβέστω κατεφλέγετο πυρὶ, οὐδενὸς τὸ σύμπαν ἐξηρημένου, ἀλλ’ οἰονεῖ πως παντὸς μορίου καὶ μέλους εἰς ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας ἀναβαίνοντος τῷ θεῷ... Πρέπει δὴ οὖν τὸ ὀλοκαυτοῦσθαι Χριστῷ· καὶ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἀληθῶς ὁλος ἅγιος, εὐώδης ἅπας καὶ ἱερός. Ἡμῖν δὲ οἰκεῖον, τὸ οὐκ εἰσάπαν ἅγιον, καὶ οὐχ ὀλοκλήρως ἱερὸν, οἷς ἔνεστί τι καὶ μολυσμοῦ διὰ τὴν ἐν ἡμῖν ἀμαρτίαν.” See also: Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*, , book X, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, PhD, in “Părinți și scriitori bisericești”/ECF, vol. 38, Bucharest, 1991, p. 362.

God could welcome only a pure and unfaltering sacrifice like Christ's, but the act of bringing it also had to be complete and most pure.

2.2 Christ's act of sacrifice and the entrance of His humanity into the state of sacrifice

In His desire to grant men the possibility to bring a pristine sacrifice and thus put themselves before the Father, the Saviour Jesus Christ became incarnate and assumed into His Hypostasis the whole human nature, which He impregnated with complete availability towards God. This assumed human nature would eventually end in death, the utmost sign of His ineffable obedience. Only in Him could the human nature die out of its obedience and love, and in the faith that God would ultimately resurrect it, thus reviving and moving the love of the Father.

The state of complete self-renunciation and His consummate surrender as a human before God, which He had constantly been under throughout His whole earthly life, ended up in His death on the Cross. This was a visible sign of His desire to keep and conclude within His assumed humanity the determination to be completely and freely given to the Father as a man as well, and to be in an eternal communion with all who follow Him in a state of sacrificial love¹².

Christ, the new Man, experienced His own crucifixion as a visible token of the truthfulness of His death to egoism, as its culmination, and as its absolute manifestation. "It was fit for Christ to go through this total test of authenticity, and to accept the consummate form of sacrifice. And the context had Him do just that"¹³.

¹² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Jertfa lui Hristos și spiritualitatea noastră prin împărtășire de ea în Sfânta Liturghie/Christ's Sacrifice and our Spiritualisation through Partaking of It at the Holy Liturgy*, (following: *Jertfa lui Hristos.../Christ's Sacrifice...*), in: "Ortodoxia", 1/1983, p. 106.

¹³ Idem, *Legătura dintre Euharistie.../Eucharist and Christian love*, p.11.

His act of sacrifice is eternal and has redemptive efficiency. The Saviour entered before the Father through His precious Blood, and there He remains, in a state of perpetual sacrifice, thus gaining an eternal redemption, as Saint Apostle Paul states in his Epistle to the Hebrews (9, 12). Father Dumitru Stăniloae sees in this Pauline epistle a clear affirmation of the permanence and uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice, and by commenting upon verses 12-14, chapter 10:

“But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever (εἰς τὸ διηνεκές), sat down at the right hand of God... For by one offering He has perfected forever (εἰς τὸ διηνεκές) those who are being sanctified.”, he notices that the expression εἰς τὸ διηνεκές “does not merely mean that Christ's sacrifice on Golgotha is so valuable that in its name all those who sin will be forgiven, or all those who believe in it will be sanctified, but that it contains and originates a power that can sanctify and therefore grant forgiveness to all those who receive it. The expression εἰς τὸ διηνεκές shows a continuity of efficiency, of irradiating power, and not of a simple judicial equivalence with all future sins”¹⁴.

2.3 The person who brings the offering - Christ, the High Priest, the perpetual Sacrifice and Altar above the heavens

Another defining element for the unique character of the union with Christ in the Holy Eucharist is the fact that He is both the One sacrificed and the One Who brings the sacrifice, for He offers Himself also as a man to the Father. The Saviour is the High Priest Who does not bring impersonal gifts or other people as offering (like the pagans do), but One Who gives Himself to God for others; thus He is a priest, a sacrifice, and an altar, all at the same time.

¹⁴ Idem, *Iisus Hristos, Arhiereu în veac/Jesus Christ, Eternal High Priest*, in: “Ortodoxia”, 2/1979, p. 218.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae insists that the uniqueness and sublimeness of Christ's priesthood is given by His perpetual offering of Himself to the Father, and particularly by the fact that His sacrifice is personal, profound and mystical, abundant in sacrificial love and delicate sensitivity. The Saviour did not want to bring to the Father some lifeless and senseless object, but He brought Himself, with His human sensitivity intact and untempered with by transgressions, whereby He was able to experience the human sin as His own and then open-heartedly receive death for it, in a way nobody else could. Father Stăniloae says that "by this, a wave of love has sprung from Him, a love that unites all to Christ Who tramples death by dying. For in loving us so, He received death for us and destroyed it inside of Him and then in all those who were attached to Him (...). Through such a love as His, stronger than death, He overcame the care for Self, as there was no shadow of sinful egoism in Him. In the complete and voluntary acceptance of death for others lies the power to defeat death. He conquered death not because it had invaded Him without His permission, but He welcomed it, for His death was an act of perfect love for humankind"¹⁵.

His pure sensibility and sensitive delicacy gives Him the power to experience Himself simultaneously as a consummate sacrifice and an eternal High Priest, and also as the highest place where the sacrifice is suffered, the Altar above the heavens, for He could not raise His sacrifice closer to God other than in His own Self. He has been and still is experiencing Himself completely as offering and offerer, and as the highest place wherein the sacrifice is brought. He was and is the closest to God, always in a state of sacrifice, always willing to radiate and transfer to those who open up to Him in love the dynamism of His offering of Himself to the Father¹⁶.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, note 125, p.106.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, note 312, p. 292.

In Christ, the status of High Priest is inseparable from that of sacrifice. Yet He is the eternal altar before the Father, the place that is most spiritually charged, closest to God and to His holiness. He is the sempiternal Altar and the enduring sacrifice that needs not be repeated. He is the Altar of the whole creation par excellence. He enters the Holy of Holies not upon certain occasions, but only once [ἀφάπαξ] (Hebrews 8, 1) and there He remains forever, celebrating a perpetual Liturgy as the eternal High Priest.

He is the One and Only High Priest, the eternal sacrifice and the absolute Altar, Who is able to lead His human brethren toward perfection. He does not enter before the Father in any random state, but He brings the most pure offering that is Himself. In this respect, Saint Cyril of Alexandria states in his comment on the setting of the golden altar in front of the One Who stands above the Cherubim: “the one who had turned away from God and upset Him through disobedience and sinful acts, Christ took into Himself and put him before the Father just as [he is] in Him, and just as [he was] in the former man [ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ πρώτῳ]. For He has entered heaven as our forerunner, so that He may now present Himself before God for us, just as wise Paul wrote (Cor. 9,24). He Who is forever with His Father is said to show Himself now, and present the human nature - as [it] is in Him, [and] as [it] was in the former man [ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ γε καὶ πρώτῳ]-, along with all our affects before the Father, thus changing the old lapse”¹⁷. Also, the act of placing the

¹⁷ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, PG 68, 620C-621A: Ἐν ἀποστροφῇ γὰρ ὄντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον, καὶ προσκεκρουκότα Θεῷ διὰ τὴν παράβασιν καὶ πολλὴν ἁμαρτίαν, ἔστησε ἄλλιν ἐν προσώπῳ τοῦ Πατρὸς ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ πρώτῳ Χριστός. «Πρόδρομος γὰρ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν εἰσβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, νῦν ἐφανερωθῆναι τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν,» καθὰ γράφει Παῦλος ἡμῖν ὁ σοφός. Ὁ γὰρ ὑπάρχων αἰεὶ μετὰ τοῦ ἰδίου Πατρὸς, νῦν ἐφανερωθῆναι λέγεται ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ γε καὶ πρώτῳ παρατιθείς ἐν ὄψει τοῦ Πατρὸς τὰ ἀνθρώπινα, καὶ τὴν ἀρχαίαν ἐκείνην ἀποστροφὴν μεθιστάς, the quoted Romanian translation, p. 337.

manna that was kept in the golden chalice into the Holy of Holies is, for the great Alexandrian saint, a symbol of the way in which humanity was placed in and with Christ before God, “for Christ is and shall always remain incorrupt, always universally known, Saint Cyril writes. And He sits before the Lord, thus in the sight of the Father. For when He became First-Born and donned the human flesh like us, He also trod into the Holy of Holies through the great and consummate Tabernacle, that is He entered Heaven, so as now to appear in the presence of God for us, as it is written (Hebrews 9, 24). For it is not Himself that He brings before the Father, but He takes us there, just as [we are] in Him [ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ], people who have fallen from His sight, since we have let disobedience and sinfulness rule our lives”¹⁸.

Likewise, the waving of the sheaf before the Lord is for Saint Cyril a symbolic sign of the way Christ is brought before the Father for, “after Emmanuel, the new incorruptible fruit of humanity had risen from the dead, He ascended into heaven so as to appear in the presence of God the Father for us, not offering Himself in God's sight, for He is always together with the Father and is never separated from Him as God, but offering us humans in Himself [ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ] in the sight of the Father, especially those who turned away from His face and were under His wrath due to Adam's disobedience and to the sin that coerced us into unrighteousness. Therefore, in Christ we gain

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, PG 68, 671B: Ἄφθαρτος γὰρ καὶ μένων ἀεὶ, καὶ ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ τε καὶ χρόνῳ γνωριμώτατος ὁ Χριστός. Καὶ ἔστιν ἐναντι Κυρίου, τοῦτ' ἔστιν, ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς τοῦ Πατρὸς. Ὅτε γὰρ γέγονε καθ' ἡμᾶς ὁ Μονογενής, τότε καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὰ Ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων, διὰ τῆς μείζονος καὶ τελειοτέρας σκηνῆς, τοῦτ' ἔστιν, εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, νῦν ἐμφανισθῆναι τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν, καθὰ γέγραπται. Οὐ γὰρ ἑαυτὸν ἐν ὄψει καθίστησι τοῦ Πατρὸς, ἀλλὰ ἡμᾶς ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ, καίτοι γεγονότας ἐκ προσώπου καὶ οἰοει πῶς ἐξ ὀφθαλμῶν, διὰ τὴν ἐν Ἀδὰμ παράβασιν, καὶ τὴν κατὰ πάντων τυραννῆσασαν ἀμαρτίαν, the quoted Romanian translation, p.305.

the power to come before God. For He deems us worthy of His sight, as we are now sanctified”¹⁹.

It is remarkable how Saint Cyril viewed the uniqueness of Christ's High Priesthood. The only man who came closest to God, the loving Father, was His Son. No man can get nearer to God than His incarnate Son. Still, He did not go there randomly, but He entered before the Father not as the simple man or as the one and only God, but rather He brought Himself as a sacrifice to the Father, and offered His sheer humanity just as it was manifest in Him and as it was destined to be from the very beginning - completely available to the divine love, which is most pure, delicate and full of sacrificial compassion for all mankind. And it is only in this manner, ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ πρώτῳ, in the way He is and always was within Himself, as Saint Cyril of Alexandria writes, that the human nature was granted admission into the infinite vastness of the supreme existence, for it was perpetually presented in Christ, the eternal High Priest, as a sweet incense fragranced sacrifice before the Father. Father Dumitru Stăniloae notes that “solely Christ, the wholly pure God made man, was worthy of bringing such a sacrifice for as He was completely surrendered as a man to the Father, His sensitivity ran so deep, that His perceptive faculties became equal to the absolute godly sensitivity and purity. Along these lines, He was able to make that very paternal sensitivity vibrate

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 1096B: ἐγγεγεμένους γὰρ ἐκ νεκρῶν ὁ Ἐμμανουὴλ ὁ νέος τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος καὶ ὡς ἐν ἀφθαρσίᾳ καρπὸς, ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, ἵν' ἐμφανισθῆ νῦν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ Πατρὸς, καὶ οὐχὶ δὴ πάντως ἑαυτὸν εἰς ὅσιν ἄγων αὐτοῦ-σύνεστι γὰρ αἰδίως, καὶ οὐκ ἂν ἀπολιμπάνοιτο τοῦ Πατρὸς, ὡς Θεὸς, ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ δὲ μᾶλλον, εἰς ὅσιν ἄγων ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἔξω προσώπου, καὶ ἐν ὀργῇ διὰ τὴν ἐν Ἀδὰμ παράβασιν, καὶ τὴν καθ' ἡμῶν τυραννήσασαν ἀμαρτίαν. Οὐκοῦν ἐν Χριστῷ κερδαίνομεν τὸ καὶ ἐν προσώπῳ τυχὸν γενέσθαι Θεοῦ. Ἄξιότ' γὰρ ἡμᾶς ἐποπτείας ἤδη λοιπὸν, ὡς ἡγιασμένους, the quoted Romanian translation, p. 593.

to the sacrificial love of the human nature, now saved from the unfeeling thickness of sinful egoism”²⁰.

2.4 The dynamism of Christ's state of sacrifice

To Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the state of perpetual sacrifice that Christ's human nature stays in is the heavenly foundation to any sacramental act of the Church, and thus he insists that “the most complete understanding of Christ's sacrifice is that which sees its movement both toward God and toward the human nature that was embraced by Christ and, through it, toward all human beings”²¹. Therefore, the Saviour's state of conscious and perpetual sacrifice envelops both His state of complete surrender before the Father, and His state of human compassion that He has for all of those who open up to Him in faith.

“He remains in this state of sacrifice permanently united with the Father and always ready to unite Himself with a constantly refreshing string of people through commiseration and by extending His sacrificial state towards them, so as to draw them to the Father”²².

2.4.1 The Saviour's sacerdotal office - a state directed to the Father before all else

In the Patristic tradition, the two aspects of the Saviour's sacrifice are inseparable. The death on the Cross the Son of God incarnate suffered is not perceived as a mere satisfaction made to atone for the debt incurred by men through sin and owed to God's honour, such as the Western theologians state, but it is primarily an act of restoration of the human nature through

²⁰ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*, note 390, p. 346.

²¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *TDO/ODT*, vol. III, p. 131.

²² Idem, *Jertfa lui Hristos.../Christ's Sacrifice...*, p. 113.

sacrifice, which was first carried out in Christ and then extended through Him in all of those who believe in Him. Father Dumitru Stăniloae takes the ideas of Father Romanidis and Father Panagiotis Nellas, and incorporates them into an Orthodox viewpoint on the satisfaction theory of atonement: Through the Saviour's sacrifice, God takes the initiative and reconciles the man with Himself, thus restoring and deifying the human nature that He assumed in His divine-human Person, for "God could not love man's state of sin, which is his state of enmity toward God. Christ as man gains God's love for the human nature by rectifying through sacrifice its state of enmity toward God. Or vice versa: by manifesting through sacrifice the will to be totally dedicated to God, the human nature is thus restored from its state of sickness. These are the two undivided aspects of the sacrifice. A parent rejoices in the child who goes back to respecting him not because he sees in this his honour re-established, but because through this respect that the child gives him again he sees the moral and even ontological resources as being restored in the child's being"²³.

Therefore, the Saviour's sacrifice is understood by the Patristic tradition as "a ransom" paid for men to God the Father by Christ, yet only in the sense that it was a necessary compensation for men, and not for God. That ransom did liaise the human nature's liberation from under the tyranny of the opaqueness that the egoism of passions engendered, and thus allowed the sacrificial love of the Holy Trinity to permeate it and endow it with all of its gifts and graces. Christ is the "Oblation" brought to the Father, and the means by which the reconciliation between man and God was effected. By entering the heavenly Holy of Holies, or before the Father in a state of sacrifice, Christ did not only secure a juridical ransom for us,

²³ Idem, *TDO/ODT*, vol. III, p. 131.

but He reaped a holy ransom, one that sanctifies and cleanses us. (Heb. 9, 12—13), states Father Dumitru Stăniloae. The juridical ransom theory of atonement shared by Anselm of Canterbury and Luther is inconsistent with this “holy ransom” that “sanctifies”. The latter fills the humanity of Christ with the entire loving and sanctifying presence of God, for His sacrifice is not a simple juridical settlement to account for the offences men have given God, but rather it is the Father's way of opening Himself up in love. The love of the Father permeates this sacrificed humanity and thus transforms and sanctifies it, prompting it to extend this loving and sanctifying presence of God into all who abide by Christ in faith²⁴.

God rejoices in the human nature that has become a sacrifice able to sense the delicate presence and sensitivity borne by His sacrificial love and that urges the Creator of all to feel a certain “satisfaction”. By giving Himself to the Father as a man as well, thereby dying to the worldly life, Christ is, as Saint Cyril of Alexandria writes, “our first and all-transcending offering, for He has brought Himself as a sacrifice before God the Father not for Himself, as the flawless Law required, but for us, His people who were under the oppression and disgrace of sin. And in the measure that we bear His likeness, we too are consecrated sacrifices, for we are those who have died to sin, insofar as sin has been put to death within us, and we live to God the life of holiness”²⁵.

²⁴ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*, note 570, p. 516.

²⁵ Idem, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, PG 68, 708BC: Αὐτὸς δὲ ἡμῶν καρποφορία πρώτη καὶ ἐξαίρετος· προσκεκόμικε γὰρ ἑαυτὸν εἰς θυσίαν τῷ Πατρὶ, καὶ οὐχ ὑπὲρ γε μᾶλλον ἑαυτοῦ, κατὰ τὸν ἀμωμήτως ἔχοντα λόγον, ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τῶν ὑπὸ ζυγῶν καὶ γραφῆν ἁμαρτίας. Καθ’ ὁμοιότητα δὲ τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸν, ἱερά θύματα καὶ ἡμεῖς, κόσμῳ μὲν ἀποθνήσκοντες, ὡς νεκρωμένης τῆς ἁμαρτίας ἐν ἡμῖν, ζῶντες δὲ τῷ Θεῷ, τὴν ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ ὁσιότητι ζωὴν; quoted Romanian translation, p. 362.

Christ is the most precious gift that could ever be brought to the Father, because He offers Himself as ransom for all, and therefore He secures the love of the Father for all His brothers in humanity. “His sacrifice is both gift and ransom. It is a ransom presented as a gift - states Father Dumitru Stăniloae - and a gift is the sign of love. He is the complete gift or perfect sacrifice, Who brings Himself to the Father for us and with us, and not as an object, but as a Subject²⁶. His sacrifice is consciously made, because it is the self-offering of a Person; therefore this self-bringing has nothing passive in it, it rather it possesses an irradiating dynamism that is capable of drawing others into acts of self-offering, for “its most intense subjectivity coincides with its fullest value for others”²⁷. Christ's sacrifice is dynamic and completely spontaneous, and that makes it rise to the Father as a sweet-smelling fragrance and cluster around itself the sacrifices of all the faithful. Its vertical dynamism is able to attract and unite all in its advancement towards the Father, so that “the union with Christ in the state of sacrifice is not the union with a passive Christ, but with *the* Christ Who is fuelled by an immense love for the Father and for all the human beings as well”²⁸.

This idea is beautifully expressed by Saint Cyril of Alexandria when he writes about the sweet-smelling aroma of sacrifices that he sees as the antetype of Christ's sacrifice:

“The sweet fragrance of the Holy Tabernacle is abundant, the sweet-incensed aroma of the churches and of the saints in them unfathomable. For the church is whence Emmanuel ascends to heaven as a sweet fragrance, where the mystery of Christ is celebrated and where God is offered the bloodless sacrifice. Therefore, from the beginning and through to the very end, the

²⁶ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*, note 415, p. 361.

²⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie.../Eucharist and Christian love*, p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

sweet-incensed fragrance dwells in the churches through Christ the Lamb"²⁹.

2.4.2 The Saviour's sacrifice restores the human nature and shapes the communion between people

God decided that only a man bearing a sacrifice of the most pleasant kind was to come near Him, and the most pleasant man could be no other than His incarnate Son, and the most pleasant sacrifice could only be the Son's life and generous giving of Self. Therefore, by dying on the Cross the Saviour sanctified the human nature He had assumed, He deified it and filled it with all of His gifts and with His undivided sacrificial love. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae notes, Christ's human nature was not "individualistically confiscated by an ordinary person, for it was assumed by a divine Hypostasis and thus it became the core whereby the divine energies irradiate and are communicated to all. Through it, Christ intends and is able to saturate all people and nurture them into His likeness, and eventually bring all who believe in Him to unity"³⁰.

"He was incarnate and He sacrificed Himself for our sake, and it is again for us that He remains in this state of sacrifice. The vertical intention manifested through sacrifice is combined with the horizontal intention, which is marked by communion... His sacrifice ascends

²⁹ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate...*, PG 68, 1092B: Δι' οὗ δὴ πάλιν ἐξέσται μαθεῖν, ὅτι πολὺ τὸ εὐώδες τῆς ἁγίας σκηνῆς, καὶ ἀκατάληκτος ἀληθῶς, ἡ τῶν Ἐκκλησιῶν εὐοσμία, καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐταῖς ἁγίων. Εὐωδιάζουσι γὰρ τὸν Ἐμμανουὴλ, καὶ τὸ ἐπὶ Χριστῷ τελοῦσι μυστήριον τὴν ἀναίμακτον λατρείαν προσκομίζοντες τῷ Θεῷ. Τοῦτο γὰρ, οἶμαι, ἐστὶ τὸ πρῶτ' τε καὶ πρὸς ἐσπέραν ὀλοκαυτίζεσθαι τοὺς ἄμνους. Ἀρχῇ γὰρ καὶ τέλει, καὶ διὰ μέσου λαμβάνεται. Οὐκοῦν ἀπαρχῆς μέχρι τέλους τὸ εὐώδες ἐν Ἐκκλησίαις, ὡς ἐν ἄμνῳ τῷ Χριστῷ, quoted Romanian transl., p. 590.

³⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie.../Eucharist and Christian love*, p. 13.

to the Father, with the determination to open the gates of heaven for everybody and to draw all people in there with Him"³¹.

The sacrifices in the Old Testament did not have the power to attract and incite people to self-sacrificing, such as the sacrifice of Christ now does. Father Dumitru Stăniloae writes about the spontaneity and dynamism of the oblation brought by the Saviour, which has the power to attract the personal sacrifices of the faithful in a community. His live, spontaneous and perpetual offering of Self to the Father "is the only one that can draw all of His believers into the act of spontaneous sacrifice, thus having them unite with it and with one another. Therefore, all the faithful are replenished with the sensibility and disposition of the universal High Priest, Who brings Himself as a sacrifice for all"³².

This double horizontal and vertical dynamism of the Saviour's sacrifice represents the power of the consummate love by which Christ, the new Adam gathers all within Himself and pierces them with the generosity of His offering, only to be able to present them in Himself as gifts and sacrifices to the Father, in an act of total obedience and self-sacrifice. Father Dumitru Stăniloae writes: "being as He is - God the Word, He wants and is able to be all in all, only to offer all to the Father. Yet, in order to do this He has to imprint the state of sacrifice in them. And that is why He donned the human flesh, so that He would not have to require this state of persons outside of Him, who would be unable to anchor themselves in it, but that He might irradiate this state in others from within His own Self."³³

The sweet fragrance of His sacrifice is a state of continual Self-giving to the Father and of unending commiseration with all people. Christ wants to identify Himself with His fellow human

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 15.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

brothers through the intensity of His Self-offering to God the Father, He wants to go through all of their inner strife, to assume the irreproachable affects of their nature, and ultimately to suffer death out of love for them, and out of the desire to liberate them from under the tyranny of sin and satan. As He wanted to bring Himself before the Father in the form of a compassion-filled sacrifice for all people, He chose to die for them and so He was able to gain their love, which He then turned into a love that was directed to the Father as well as to the rest of the people, thus uniting all in the communion of perfect love.

Christ's sacrifice is the bonding agent that works through men to bring together the entire creation, and that places it within the sacrificial love of the Holy Trinity, in the never-ending Liturgy of love between the divine Persons. The Saviour has elevated the human nature to the highest place before the Father, and by imbuing it with the sensitivity and delicacy of His complete surrender and self-renunciation, He converted it into the quintessential Oblation. This humanity, sanctified by sacrifice, is full of compassion for all people, and that prompts the vastness and generosity of the divine love to morph into the feeling of sacrificial solidarity with those who share the same human nature with Christ, a kind of solidarity that is plenary experienced in His visible offering of His Body and Blood during the Holy Liturgy.

To Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the mystery of salvation is the Mystery of Person and communion. There is no communion in the absence of persons, and the person is genuinely asserted only through sacrifice and self-giving³⁴. In his opinion, everything in the relationship between man and God is

³⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Șapte dimineți cu Părintele Stăniloae/Seven mornings with Father Stăniloae*, ed by Sorin Dumitrescu, Bucharest, Anastasia Publishing House, 1992, pp. 22 and 151: "I have emphasized the idea of person, yet only in connection with communion. (...) Person and communion. That is not only the communion, but also the person"

personal, and full of sensibility and delicacy. The Creator of all took the initiative to sensitize the human nature and raise it to the capacity to sense His complete and most pure love, and gave it the chance to sample the life of communion that is in the bosom of the Holy Trinity. Only Christ could accomplish that through His consummate sacrifice, for He infused the human nature He had assumed with a piercing sensitivity and with the sentiment of total Self-giving, by which He allowed it to experience its meeting with God and with its fellow people in a plenary way. The Saviour's Self-sacrifice lifted the human nature to a level of sensitivity where it was able to sense the delicate presence and sensitivity of the divine, and filled it with compassion for people, and thus He transformed all people into sons of the Father and brothers of His by humanity.

This is the environment and the manner in which God wishes to unite Himself with the human soul. The meeting with him in His mystical death and in His resurrected state cannot take place unless the man is sensitized through a life of asceticism and observance of the holy commandments.

3 Christ's oblation and the sacrifice of the Christians, as the yield of the impenetrable gift exchange between God and man that takes place in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist

The Mystery of the Holy Eucharist is the locus wherein a wonderful gift exchange between man and God takes place. The Eucharist is a Mystery, for it comes as a gift from God. Yet this is not a regular gift, but one that is impregnated by sacrifice. The consummate gift that God gives to the man is His Only Begotten Son. God does not offer His Son randomly to the world, but rather presents Him as One Who has become - through His passion and Resurrection - both substance of the sacrifice, altar, and High Priest, Who brings Himself perpetually also as a man to the Father.

God knows that the man cannot bring Him anything that might be deemed worthy of the magnificence of His consummate goodness and love. Therefore, out of His sublime mercy and goodness, He gives the man the gift of this Sacrifice well acceptable to Him, this Sacrifice that is, in fact, a Person in a state of sacrifice. Hence, this is the only truly sweet incensed Sacrifice that the man can bring to God as a gift that He essentially provided to the man. Just as His Sacrifice on the Cross represents the redemption that men receive as a gift and as the perfect token of love, so also the Eucharistic sacrifice represents a gift that requires the existence of sacrificial love and complete self-giving between Giver and receiver.

The Holy Eucharist is a sacrifice that comes as a gift, for the man receives the substance of the sacrifice at the Holy Liturgy, just like Abraham once did. Yet this substance of the sacrifice is, at the same time, the gift which presupposes a sacrifice, which requires and summons the man to give himself completely to God.

“In the Eucharist Christ offers Himself as man in sacrifice to the Father, but this is not some kind of juridical transaction; instead, it is the way that Christ opens up for us the path toward the Father. It is to this end, therefore, that He places Himself at our disposal in the Eucharist: so that together with Himself, He can also offer us to the Father. For we can only enter before the Father when we are in a pure sacrificial state, and we can only reach this state of pure sacrifice by our participation in Christ's state of pure sacrifice. In this sense, therefore, Christ is offering Himself continually to the Father in order to give us the power to offer ourselves also with Him”³⁵.

Christ presented Himself also completely as a man to the Father, by placing His entire human sensibility, delicacy and

³⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, *TDO/ODT*, vol. III, p. 111.

availability before God, and by assuming the sin of the entire world as if it were His Own. Infused by the tendency toward total self-giving, Christ offers us as sacrifices not as if we were simple objects but rather as persons, and therefore as sacrifices who can make the offering of their own selves to the Father, after having been revived by the love of His Son. We want to bring ourselves as sacrifices because we have in ourselves the Source of all self-sacrifice. And as Christ is continually offering Himself to the Father as a Subject of His deified Body, and as He is fully present, with all of His pure human sentience, in His offering of Himself to the Father, so must we follow in the footsteps of our elder Brother and offer our whole selves - body and soul - to our Heavenly Father³⁶. This is the kind of self-offering that Christ wishes to instil in us, for He wants us to become like Him, totally free subjects, fully present in our own offering. He wishes us to give our whole life to God, so as to have it returned to us, deified and suffused with the fragrance of His generous love. Thus, the great Romanian theologian states that, "in the Eucharist, these two movements (from us to God and from God to us) encounter one another in the most complex and marked manner. The Eucharist is made up of numerous feelings, acts, and concerns that come from us to God and from God to us"³⁷.

In the Holy Eucharist, Christ offers Himself to us in the fullness of the delicacy and sensitivity of His generous love, which makes Him bid us to participate in His self-sacrifice in such a way, that our sacrifice becomes part of His and His sacrifice part of ours³⁸.

"His sacrifice is not a sacrifice offered on His own behalf but on ours. But for that to be the case, we must appropriate the sacrifice He made on our behalf, just as He too actually appropriates our sacrifice when He

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

offers it as His own. The fragrance of His sacrifice thus becomes the fragrance of our sacrifice too, and the fragrance of our sacrifice the fragrance of His"³⁹.

In this sense, the Patristic Theology - the Philokalic tradition in particular - highlights the fact that, in order for this wonderful gift exchange to take place, the man needs to approach the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist in a state of sacrifice engendered by fasting, vigilance and observance of the holy commandments. This is the personal sacrifice which the man adds to the immeasurable sacrifice of Christ's, and which Christ will then offer to the Father as a fruit of His Own sacrifice.

3.1 The Holy Martyrs and their martyric deaths - a testimony to their wholeheartedness in offering their whole lives with Christ to the Father

The lives of the saints are the utmost proof of man's capacity for sacrifice. The outcome of this wondrous gift exchange between God and man, that takes place in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist, is visible in the life of each Christian who has made the heroic decision to dedicate his entire existence to God, and thus follow Christ in His ascension to God, just like a sweet incensed spiritual fragrance. In His ineffable love for men, "Christ does not want to be alone as a loving sacrifice before the Father; He does not want to gain, as man, the Father's love only for Himself but also for his brothers and sisters in humanity"⁴⁰ and for those of a kindred spiritual fellowship with Him⁴¹. And as they sacrificed themselves to the Father, just like He did, He

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p.223.

⁴¹ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, PG 68, 332D.

continually fills them with the power of His sacrificial love through the Holy Eucharist.

The holy martyrs were all aware of the presence of Christ in them, as well as of their own existence in Him. In 203, right before her martyrdom, Saint Felicitas⁴² exclaimed: "Out there, amidst the cruel beasts, there will be Another Person in me, and He will suffer for me, for I shall suffer for Him, too". She was then trying to put in words the depth of the mystery of love that is between man and God, a love that culminates in and through sacrifice. All the martyrologies write about this unique and mysterious identity between the suffering Christian and Christ, the High Priest Who is perpetually in a state of sacrifice, Who receives the sacrifice of His follower and then presents it to the Father alongside His Own. The awareness of Christ's presence in the souls of the confessors of the faith can also be found in the account of Saint Blandina's martyrdom (dating back to the year 177). This describes how all the Christians who witnessed the saint being tortured to her death actually saw, "with their very own eyes, that in their sister lived and suffered the One Who had been crucified for them"⁴³.

Christ's suffering alongside the holy martyrs - these devout Christians who chose to sacrifice their own beings in response to the Saviour's sacrificial love - is a reality that can be found throughout the entire Romanian memorialistic literature. The uniqueness of the gift they wished to bring to God through

⁴² Cornelius Ioannes Maria Ioseph Van Beek (ed.), *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis 15, in Florilegium Patristicum*, Fasciculus XLIII, Coloniae (Köln), 1938, Latin and Greek text, pp. 48-49; Herbert Musurillo (ed.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford, 1972; 2nd ed., Oxford, 1979, Latin text with English translation, pp. 122-124; R. Knopf und Gustav Krüger (eds.), *Ausgewählte Märtyrerakten*, dritte Auflage, Latin text, Tübingen, 1929, p. 41 ; M. Viller, *Martyre et pericction* in "Revue d'ascétique et mystique", VI (1925), pp. 3-35; Fr. Prof. Ioan Rămureanu (ed.), *Actele martirice/Acts of the Martyrs*, in "Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești"/ ECF, vol. 11, Publishing House: Institutul Biblic pentru Misiune, Bucharest, 1982, p. 121.

⁴³ Ioan Rămureanu (ed.), *Actele martirice.../Acts of the Martyrs*, p. 67

Christ was a life lived according to the commandments of the Holy Gospel, i.e. a life of honesty and restraint, of altruistic love and caring for the poor. Their honest renunciation of the world was constantly placed under trial in the inferno of the Communist prisons from Aiud, Gherla and Pitești. It was there that the holy confessors of the faith deepened their spiritual connection with Christ, in the midst of unfathomable torments - cold, hunger, thirst, beatings and deep humiliations. It was also there that they managed to convert their abject and unsanitary cells into real monasteries, by pursuing the habit of ceaseless praying and by consolidating their connection with the sacrificed and resurrected Christ. Only the presence of the Saviour through the Holy Spirit could grant them help, enlightenment, strength and render them victorious over the powers of the dark.

The Romanian holy confessors of the faith, who suffered the ordeals of the Communist prisons, knew that their lives were hidden with Christ in God; hence none of the narratives on their lives can truly unveil the spiritual incandescence of their souls' mystical depths, which was delicately shielded by their sheer humility and simpleness.

It is rather difficult to find words to describe the holy martyrs. These men sampled the depths of the Saviour's sacrificial love in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. They also learned how to climb down, by way of ceaseless prayer, deep into their souls' innermost secret chamber, i.e. that human Holy of Holies which the Saviour entered through the Mystery of the Holy Baptism, and then to find Him there, to worship Him and humbly let themselves be permeated by His ineffable love. That was the mystical place where the holy confessors of the faith chose to live in, their only nourishment being the divine words and the Heavenly Bread. That was the place where they chose to nurture and fashion the new man inside them, hardening his virtues through patience and testing his love through suffering and eventually death. That is where all the saints sensed the fragrance of Heaven and the longing for eternity. That is where

they attained their proper spiritual formation that later helped them serve their brethren, and thus forever keep themselves close to God.

3.2 The death and resurrection with Christ in the sacramental and ethically ascetical lives of the faithful

Christians today are not called to die a bloody death in order to prove their faith, like the imprisoned saints or the multitude of martyrs from the Church Synaxarion did. Nevertheless, they are still summoned to suffer a mystical death to this world, an uninterrupted renunciation of sins and advancement in virtues, as a steady escape from the bounds of egoism and into the eternity of Christ's selfless love.

“Thus our sacrifice, being a continuous renunciation of sins as forms of egoism, takes the form of the virtues and of constant advancement in them; it takes the form of loving openness toward God and our fellow human beings, given that all virtues are animated by love for God and for our fellow human beings and that they end up in a supreme and endless love”⁴⁴.

On the duty that every Christian has to die to sin, Saint Cyril of Alexandria writes:

“I consider that we must offer as a sweet fragrance to God our ways of living (virtues) in Christ, becoming like fragrances and offering ourselves to God as sweet-smelling burnt offerings, according to what I think has been rightly said: ‘Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service’ (Rom. 12,1). (...) for all the time and without ceasing, from the beginning until the end, we offer to

⁴⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *TDO/ODT*, vol II, Bucharest, 1978, p. 223.

Christ the sweet fragrance through every virtue in the holy tabernacle, that is, in the Church"⁴⁵.

The act of offering and sacrificing their lives to Christ is symbolically represented in the enacted rituals of the Church. Christians bring bread and wine at the Holy Liturgy, which are fundamental elements that preserve man's life, and the act of offering them to God is a symbol of the way the faithful bring and surrender their whole life to God. The bread and the wine are fruits of the earth and gifts from God, which involve a lot of labour and effort, and that is what makes them worthy to be returned to God as His Own gift, now imbued with the man's sacrifice.

"Through the descent of the Holy Spirit, however, the bread—or life offered as a gift—is transformed into the body of Christ, and this body, given to the faithful as a gift of a higher order, lifts up the whole of their life to a deified state. Nevertheless, if the bread offered by the community is to be transformed into His body, Christ must take it into Himself as a sacrifice of the community. The Eucharist thus is constituted of a dialogue and encounter of gifts between human beings and God in Christ, and as the culmination of this dialogue and encounter. This dialogue unfolds not only in life but also throughout the course of the Liturgy, as it lifts itself up to the culminating stage that it assumes in the Eucharist"⁴⁶.

Christ's act of bringing the Christians as persons before the Father is especially obvious in the ritual of cutting the particles and remembering all the faithful by name that is done at the

⁴⁵ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate...*, PG 68, 672D.

⁴⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă.../Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol III, Bucharest, 2003, p. 113.

Holy Liturgy. The entire Prothesis ritual, finalised in the 11th century⁴⁷, expresses the belief of the Church that the sacrifice of each and every Christian alone is personally assumed by Christ in His sacrifice and thus brought to the Father. The remembrance of each particular name and the placing of the particles near the Lamb emphasize their persistence as persons in their endeavour to bring their sacrifice, as well as the distinct and personal character of their offering. The entire Church – both Triumphant and Militant – is represented like an icon on the Holy Diskos, and is symbolically gathered around the slain Lamb, Who infuses it with His state of sacrifice, in order to bring it to the Father as an extension and a fruit of His Own sacrifice. Christ's sacrificed Body carries within the sacrifice of the Church, which He also brings to the Father in a personal manner, united with His Own sacrifice, although distinct from it. Therefore, the particles placed on the Holy Diskos do not become the Saviour's Body and Blood, because they represent all the members of the Church that are remembered by name at the mystery of Prothesis. This shows that all those who are gathered around the slain Lamb are partakers in the gifts that derive from His sacrifice. The saints, who are now in Heaven, enjoy the Liturgy of the eternal love that is within the Holy Trinity, and they continually offer themselves with Christ to the Father, just as they used to do while they were still on earth. Bound to the flesh in this world, the churchgoers can take part in Christ's perpetual Self-giving to the Father, their own sacrifice joining that of the heavenly Lamb via the seen rituals of the Holy Liturgy, through which Christ descends and then presents His expiatory Body and Blood as a gift to the faithful, so as to bring all those who believe in Him before the Father, in a state of pure sacrifice. Hence, the particles that are cut out for the saints represent their mystical surrender to God and the

⁴⁷ Petre Vintilescu, *Liturghiile bizantine privitye istoric în structura și rânduiala lor/A Historical Overview of the Structure and Rituals of the Byzantine Liturgies*, Bucharest, 1943, p. 26.

dedication of all their earthly victories to Christ, as proofs that His sacrifice has brought forth fruit in them. Also, the particles for the living and for the dead are cut out in order to help those who are still on their way towards the Kingdom of Heaven to learn, sample, and experience the dynamics of the consummate selfless love of the Holy Trinity.

The meeting and communion with Christ in the Holy Eucharist is a mystical and personal union. This union is complete. In it, Christ's Body extends Himself in the body and soul of each Christian and infuses in them all the qualities and sensibilities, the entire delicacy and beauty of His deified human nature. Father Dumitru Stăniloae states that, "through this intimacy and communication perfected in Him, we experience the states, feelings, and activities of Christ, and He experiences ours, penetrated and characterized by His own. Ultimately, the full union between Christ and ourselves, realized through the Eucharist, is the testimony of His supreme love for us, and this is the basis of the mutual communication perfected between Him and us"⁴⁸.

Within this mystical union with Christ, the Christians are not only co-subjects with Christ of their own bodies, but they get to live Christ's life as if it was their own, or as the Holy Apostle Paul writes: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2, 20). In this mystical union, the Christians experience all of the Saviour's life events in the liturgical life of the Church, as if they were always contemporaneous and always happening right then. Yet this does not occur through an effort of memory, or via a symbolic re-presentation of the same, but through their personal lives with Christ, or rather through their experience of Christ living in them⁴⁹.

Hence the joy of the Christians during all the Great Feasts, where the Holy Liturgy perpetuates the "remembrance" of the

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

wonderful acts that adorned the life of the Saviour or the lives of His saints. However, this is not simply an intellectual remembrance, but a full experience of His mystical presence in the soul of each faithful person, an experience that brings all the events of His life forever in the present.

Conclusions

The Holy Eucharist is the consummate manner and environment in which man enters the communion with God. It effects the communion with Christ, Who stands before the Father in a perpetual state of Self-sacrifice, continuously pouring His compassionate heart out for all humanity. The Saviour's sacrificial state is the celestial foundation of the Eucharistic Liturgy here on earth. Its purpose is to enable the man to truly participate in His perennial sacrifice, and to sacrifice himself, just as Christ did, by dying to the egotistical pleasures of this world and living a life filled with selflessness and with the Self-giving of the deified humanity of the Son of God. The holy martyrs are Christians who have been tried and proven honest in their complete surrender to God, for they accepted death as an offering to the Father, just like the Saviour did. Thus, the lives of the martyrs uncover the deep and profound meaning of the Holy Eucharist, for they are themselves fruits of the Communion with the Body and Blood of the crucified and resurrected Christ, and of His state of perpetual Self-offering also as a man to the Father.

Holding this belief at their core, the Eastern Orthodox Christians know that, in order to approach Christ's pure sacrifice, they must undergo an ascetic preparation that is absolutely necessary for them, as it enables them to feel, understand, and get a taste of the profoundness of Christ's Self-giving in the Eucharist of the Church. When they well over with this compassionate love, the faithful are called to a Liturgy after the Liturgy, to the sufferance of a mystical and bloodless death

to the pleasures and lusts of this world, and they are summoned to enact the gifts they received through the Holy Mysteries, for the sake of reiterating Christ's whole life both sacramentally and ethically.