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The Holy Eucharist as Fulfillment of the Human Person

Abstract

The Holy Eucharist is the Mystery of the communion of the faithful with the very Flesh and Blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life. It depicts the real and bloodless sacrifice of the Saviour on the Cross, through the transformation of bread and wine into the Flesh and Blood of the Saviour Himself, under the blessing of the Holy Spirit, invoked by the bishop or the priest, while the community is praying for the descent of the Holy Spirit.

The Service of the Holy Communion – the perfect and most appropriate means of connecting with God – is called the “Eucharist” (i.e. gratitude),



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being one of the seven sacraments instituted by Christ the Saviour Himself, through thanksgiving prayer and through the gesture of blessing the bread and wine cup at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19-20). In Orthodoxy, the Eucharist is not only a simple sacramental liturgical act, but the center of convergence for the entire church life.

Keywords

Eucharist, Sacraments, Liturgy, Sacrifice

1 Introduction

The Holy Eucharist is called a mystery because the term is a translation of the Greek noun “*mysterion*”, which means a hidden, secret thing, which cannot be comprehended, a secret teaching. In the late writings of the Old Testament (*The Book of Tobit, the Book of Judith, the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach*) and in the New Testament, the term “*mysterion*” (*sod* in Hebrew) refers particularly to God’s plan for human salvation (Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 2:7-9). The Lord’s plan of salvation was carried out through Jesus Christ, Who is *par excellence* “the mystery of God the Father”¹ (Colossians 2:2), “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations” (Colossians 1:26) who “is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 3:5). The apostles were given the knowledge of “the mystery of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11 and parallel verses). Therefore, the Holy Apostles witness the moment of its institution, while at the same time being the first to receive it and to fulfill the Saviour’s

¹ All biblical references are taken from an online version of *The Bible*, available at: biblehub.com [August 5, 2014].

testament: “do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). Not only was the Eucharist established by Christ as a Holy Mystery, but He was also willing to prepare people for receiving it. Thus, after having miraculously fed five thousand people in the desert with five loaves and two fish, the Lord spoke about *the bread of life* and the absolute necessity to commune in order to be saved: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:35, 47, 51, 53-55).

The Eucharist is the absolute communion with Christ here on earth. “The union with the Lord in the Eucharist” – says Father Dumitru Stăniloae – “is a complete union precisely because He is no longer a worker in us only through the energy introduced into us by His Spirit but also through His body and His blood, imprinted on our body and blood.” This Eucharistic communion is not achieved individually, but together with other believers. “Hence the Eucharist is also the act of realizing and continually increasing the full unity of the Church, as the extended body of Christ”².

However much we may write or preach about the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist, it would still be too little and insufficient for this truly is the greatest of sacraments, reviewing and accomplishing the salvation of man and of the whole world. The Holy Eucharist is the Sacrament of Sacraments, the Holy Mystery of the Church *par excellence*, summing up the whole content of our living faith. All of the other holy mysteries and all our services begin and end with the Holy Eucharist. To experience it, to actually participate in it with all one’s being represents the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega for one’s life in Christ and for the Orthodox churchly

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God: The Sanctifying Mysteries*, vol. 5, translated by Ioan Ioniță and Robert Barringer. (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), pp. 80-81.

experience. The Mystery of the Holy Eucharist is the centre of spiritual life in our Orthodox Church.

The only supply from our life here on earth and nourishment for our journey to the other, eternal life is the Holy Communion, the partaking of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is to it that we owe our eternal life: “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54).

2 The Eucharist as Lord’s Supper

In time, the Holy Eucharist received many names: the Lord’s Supper, the Master’s Supper, the breaking of bread, the cup of benediction, the cup of salvation, the cup of life, the Agape feast, the Blessed Sacrament, the Divine Mysteries, the (Holy) Communion, etc.³

Ever since the first centuries of Christianity, the Eucharist was mentioned under various names: the Eucharist (*εὐχαριστεῖν* – *gratias agere*) because by means of this mystery God is given thanks. In classical Greek, *εὐχαριστεῖν* means gratitude, thanksgiving, and we may say that it is the consecrated term used to designate this Holy Mystery today.

In the New Testament the Eucharist appears under different names:

The Holy Sacrifice (*θυσία*) – reenacting Christ’s unique sacrifice and implying the sacrifice of the Church, which is simultaneously “a sacrifice of praise” (Hebrews 13:15), “spiritual sacrifice” (1 Peter 2:5), a pure and sacred sacrifice because it embodies and surpasses all the sacrifices in the Old Testament.

³ Isidor Todoran, Ioan Zăgorean, *Teologia Dogmatică-manual pentru seminariile teologice (Dogmatic Theology – A Textbook for Theological Seminaries)*. (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1991), p. 337.

The Breaking of bread (*κλάσις τού άρτου* – *fractio panis*) – as this rite typical of Hebrew supper was used by Christ the Saviour during the Last Supper as well as on other occasions (Matthew 14:19, 15:36, etc.). It is because of this gesture that Luke and Cleopas recognize their teacher as they share supper, while early Christians used this phrase to refer to Eucharistic gatherings.

Eucharistic gathering (*σύναξις*) – because it is around the Eucharist that the faithful gather, and the Eucharist is the living expression of the Church.

Communion – because by this sacramental liturgical act we partake of the Lord's Sacrifice and Resurrection, we become bearers of Christ, sharing in the holy gift and turning into living members of Christ's mystical body.

After many imaginations and prophesies, after the Lord's appearance in the flesh, after His miracles and His teaching about the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the time has come for the sacred performance of the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist by our very Lord and Saviour.

The evening of Holy Thursday, before His redemptive Passion, Jesus is in the big upper room in Jerusalem. He presides here over the Last Supper, the last meal that Jesus shares with His apprentices before His crucifixion. It is during this Supper that the Blessed Sacrament is instituted. The mystery of the Holy Eucharist, the mystery of the Body of the Church, the absolute and universal mystery, is accomplished by the sacrifice of the sacred body of the Son of God the Father on the cross⁴.

At the Last Supper, i.e. one day before the Hebrew Passover and on the very night that He was going to be arrested and dragged to torture, the Saviour instituted the sacrament of the Holy Communion. According to Apostle Matthew's account, things

⁴ Christoforos Stavropoulos, "Dumnezeiasca Euharistie: Taina tainelor" ("The Holy Eucharist: The Sacrament of Sacraments"), translated from Greek into Romanian by Dr. Constantin I. Băjău, Athens: Editura "Apostoliki Diakonia" a Bisericii Ortodoxe a Greciei, p. 19.

happened thus: "While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.'" (Matthew 26:26-28) It is almost with the same words that the other two Synoptic Gospels describe the event (Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20), together with the Holy Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 11:23-25). Not only did Christ the Saviour perform this Mystery Himself, but He also commanded it to be performed until His Second Advent: "Do this in remembrance of Me." (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:25); "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26). This command was closely observed by the Holy Apostles and the early Christian church. (Acts 2:42, 10:7, 11; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 11:23).

Scholars who specialize in texts about the institution of the Eucharist have highlighted the fact that, at Supper, the Saviour and the Apostles shared a Passover meal where the rites of the old Law were mixed with the ones of the new Law. The two Gospels reveal that two apprentices prepared the Passover meal "on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread". However, there are no details about the exact way in which the Supper took place, but the ritual of Hebrew Passover presupposed the distribution of a cup of wine called "the fruit of life", over which blessings and prayers were said; when the meal was over, the Hallel songs of praise were recited in three parts at various intervals. Some interpreters of the Bible have gone so far as to consider, "in favour of a doctrinal approach, that the Supper was transformed into a Passover meal" or that "Jesus binds a new rite to the Passover ritual, which will serve as a memorial of His Passion and close death". Yet it is not an ordinary Passover meal, where the Passover lamb would be eaten, but the anticipated representation of the Sacrifice of "the Lamb of God" under the guise of the Eucharistic supper. Jesus

now institutes the Eucharist as a symbol of a new “covenant”, where He Himself becomes “our Passover”, “For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Therefore, the Eucharistic ritual performed by our Saviour should not be read as deriving from Hebrew Passover practices. The Christian supper is not the Hebrew Passover – from which it differs also in terms of the elements used and the date of celebration –, nor from the Hebrew Friday night *Kiddush* – from which it differs through its characteristic rituals –, nor from the pious gathering accompanied by readings and prayers, as in the Jewish diasporic communities. The Christian supper is an exclusively Christian rite, which is well-known and very important, and which belongs to a public ecclesiastical cult that reenacts and foreshadows the Lord’s death until His Second Coming.

In the view of Holy Apostle Paul, the Christian supper is an essential religious act and not an ordinary meal. It has nothing in common with the abominable idol-worshipping banquets and it should not be tainted by the introduction of profane customs. The Lord’s Supper is not the same as the Hebrew Passover because both the elements of the Supper and the date of celebration are different. It is a Christian rite, belonging to a public church cult, which will reenact the Lord’s sacrifice and resurrection “until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26)⁵.

Through Jesus Christ’s instituting of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist we are offered the sacramental bread and the new wine. Christ will partake of them together with His apprentices in the Kingdom of God⁶.

The Last Supper represents the passage from “Passover-level” and the blood of sacrificed animals to “our great and holy host”, when there is no more blood of sacrificial animals but a foreshadowing of blood spill for redemption and eternal life.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

3 The Eucharist – Attaining Spiritual Perfection

Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist are the three mysteries of initiation. Whereas Chrismation gives one the power to develop the new life in Christ received through Baptism, the Eucharist perfects this life as an absolute union to Jesus Christ or the Church. The Eucharist is the sacrament that crowns the sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation, not only as a source of strength and new life, but also starting virtually from Baptism, which in itself possesses potential power, it helps us develop through Chrismation. The Eucharist involves the power of absolute death in terms of a separate existence from God, which started through Baptism and was developed through Chrismation⁷. It is through the Eucharist that we undergo such stages in our spiritual life as purification through Baptism and illumination through Chrismation. From now on, we are no longer children, nor teenagers in Christ, but – in the Eucharist – we become adults in Christ, communing with Him in the most intimate of ways. The Holy Eucharist is the perfection of all other mysteries; it is the only mystery able to eliminate any human unrighteousness in God's sight; and it is the only sacrament that makes the gifts received through the other sacraments shine brightly.

The first mystery that establishes our union with Christ, in mystical terms, is Baptism, the holy mystery which enables our birth in Christ and by which we may start a new life, becoming new people and new members of Christ's mystical body. By means of Baptism we all become members, not of the sinful body, but of the mystical body of Christ, which is the Church with all its members: "All members that Christ first creates through Baptism and then strengthens with the blessing of the Holy Spirit through Chrismation, they all make up the spiritual organism of the Church, whose head is Christ. He is the heart which throbs with the blood of life, He is the spirit that

⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, pp. 73-74.

transforms and gives life”⁸. As a member of the mystical body of Christ, man should not feed as if on any food. This nourishment is the Eucharistic body of Christ, and the members of Christ’s mystical body must be cleansed with His Blood and assimilated to His Body. This process of divine assimilation is actually, concretely and physically, done through the Holy Eucharist, the sacramental act by which, at Baptism, Christians turn into members of the Body of Christ, just as “the stems of the grape vines are organically attached to the main trunk”.

The new life through Baptism, which follows the death of the old man cannot exist without the perspective and the foreshadowing of the eternal life sustained by the Eucharist. Thus, Saint Paul says: “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection”. (Romans 6:4-5)

Through the Eucharist we have inside of us the Christ who died and was raised; it is through Him that we prepare for our death on earth as for a death that we are going to surpass through Him again. The Eucharist thus gives us not only the strength to die to sin, but also to surrender to God.

Thus we no longer fear death for we bear inside of us the body of the Risen Christ, as a cure or medicine for immortality or eternal righteousness, as the Church Fathers call the Eucharist: “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he will also live because of Me. ‘This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever’.” (John 6:57-58) “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life

⁸ Nichifor Crainic, *Curs de Teologie Mistică* (Coursebook on Mystical Theology). Bucharest, 1941, p. 230, apud. Dr. Gheorghe Ispas, „Euharistia: Taina Unității Bisericii” (“The Eucharist: the Sacrament of Church Unity”), p. 67 [my translation].

and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:54) “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.” (John 6:56) It must be mentioned here that the mystical death in Christ, which we partake of through the Eucharist, on a deeper level than at Baptism and as a preparation for our own actual death, does not come into contrast with a simultaneous taste of renewed life on earth. It is only through the mystical death in God that our self is completely perfected, filling with eternal, everlasting life⁹.

The union with our Lord in the Eucharist is a complete union precisely because He no longer works within us through the energy brought into us by the Holy Spirit, but through His flesh and blood, merged with our own flesh and blood: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20) – says Apostle Paul to the Galatians. The Eucharist also represents “the act of realizing and continually increasing the full unity of the Church, as the extended body of Christ”, perfecting in this way too the action begun with Baptism and the Chrismation¹⁰.

The other sacraments only help us to find Christ as a means of preparation for our receiving Him and enabling us to commune with Him, but by the Holy Eucharist we can actually receive Him and commune with Him. Therefore, the bread of life is given to us as a reward for our spiritual life. The elements of the Holy Supper have a double effect: on the one hand, they cleanse those who are unrighteous, and on the other, they illuminate those who are already cleansed¹¹.

Jesus Christ is present at all sacraments, pouring His holy grace differently in each and every one of them. Thus, through Baptism, we share in Christ’s new life, we appropriate to

⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 80-81.

¹¹ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Despre Viața în Hristos (The Life in Christ)*, translated from French into Romanian by Prof. Teodor Bodogae, Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2009, p. 131- 134.

ourselves His character and He cleanses us of our sins. In the Sacrament of Baptism, Christ creates us as members of His mystical body and as powers alive through Him. Through Chrismation, He helps us grow spiritually, strengthens and fortifies us in spirit, pouring onto us the gifts of the Holy Spirit, so that in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ can give Himself to us completely with His sanctifying Flesh and Blood. That is why the Mystery of the Eucharist is actually the greatest of the Holy Mysteries, for “one cannot go beyond it, nor can one add anything else”¹².

This sacrament results in the communion with Christ, the source of all gifts and graces. By partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, which turned on the Holy Table into the Flesh and Blood of Jesus Christ, we merge with Him in direct communion. This mystical, sacramental union perfects our life because, if Christ completely abides in us, He is not limited to indwelling, but binds us to Himself, perfects us, making our body and soul one and the same with Him. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives in the Eucharist and in us, never leaves but stays within us, as He Himself says it in the account of Apostle John: “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him” (John 6:56).

If we, the faithful, are worthy and spiritually sinless when approaching the Holy Supper, Christ pours into our souls and becomes one and the same with us, filling us and “Immediately after communion, our body, our spirit and our powers are consecrated, for Flesh is united to flesh, Blood with blood and Spirit with spirit. The result is that good grows stronger to defeat evil, the holy rules over the human”, or – as Saint Paul has it when speaking about resurrection – “what is mortal will be swallowed up by life”, and further on: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20)¹³.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 114 [my translation].

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 116 [my translation].

How beautifully do these words outline the superiority and primacy of the Eucharist among the other holy mysteries! They all have unarguable results in spiritual life, but the Holy Eucharist perfects all of the others. It represents the highest peak in spiritual life. This sacrament is always very closely connected to the others, and they cannot bear fruit one without the others.

After having become spiritual children through our birth in Baptism, and having been helped to reach spiritual adolescence through the Chrismation, we become fully grown men spiritually through the Eucharist; we thus reach the status of the perfect man.

Our whole being changes through the Eucharistic union. Christ shapes us in Christ's image, He makes us like Him, transforming us into new human beings, new people. Of course, we should not read our resemblance to Christ as His becoming like us, ruled by the body and the natural laws, but as His making us like Him through this communion. The prerequisite of our worthiness remains of course desirable for the effects of this communion.

Having attained this worthiness and having had God's grace bestowed upon us, human nature changes completely, and after having renewed himself in Baptism, man has now climbed the ladder of spiritual perfection. Our human nature is thus transfigured and consecrated, this being the actual purpose of the mystical-Eucharistic union with Christ. Brotherly solidarity in the Flesh of Christ – the Church – affirms itself through the Eucharistic communion and through the mutual responsibility shared with the faithful in order to achieve intercommunion: peace among people, mutual forgiveness, prayers for everybody, visiting the ill to commune them with the Eucharistic elements for good health and eternal life, feasts – they all suggest brotherly love.

Attaining the kingdom of God is not only the faithful person's supreme aim, but also a "present reality, inaugurated by baptism and nourished by communion in the Body and Blood of

the glorified Lord. It is a 'sacramental' reality that radically transforms our understanding of the origin and the ultimate destiny of human existence"¹⁴.

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¹⁴ Breck, John, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), pp. 5-18. Online: http://www.jacwell.org/Supplements/sacred_gift_of_life.htm [August 9th, 2014].