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The Holy Liturgy as Sacrament of Trinitarian Love. Main Aspects of Dumitru Stăniloae's Liturgical and Ascetical Theology

Abstract

The complex and integral vision on the Holy Liturgy of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae is fascinating and complete in its depth. The Eucharistic celebration is only the visible dimension of the eternal Liturgy of love within the Holy Trinity. Christ is the perpetual slain Lamb in permanent state of sacrifice and the Holy Liturgy is the visible act of the dynamism of His altruistic love, through which He wants to gather all in Himself, to impregnate them with His sacrificial love, and then bring them all before the Father. Bound to the flesh in this world, the Christians can take part in Christ's perpetual Self-giving to the Father, with their own sacrifice joining that of the heavenly Lamb via the seen rituals of the Holy Liturgy, through which Christ descends and



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substantiates Himself, and then extends His expiatory Body and Blood to the faithful, so as to bring all those who believe in Him/His devotees before the Father, in a state of pure sacrifice.

Keywords

Dumitru Stăniloae, Holy Liturgy, Sacrifice, St. Cyrill of Alexandria, Liturgical Theology

1 Introduction

Many pages have been written on Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, yet not one person can truly state that they have exhausted all the defining aspects of the personality and work of this remarkable Romanian theologian. His original creative genius, his whole discourse covering an unique mix of all the aspects of theological research - Dogmatic and Moral Theology, Spirituality, Church History, Biblical and Liturgical Theology -, his charisma of a tireless translator and commentator of Patristic literature, the way he built his entire rhetoric around the mystery of experiencing God, all of these impregnated his work with a value that has profoundly impressed the theological and philosophical realms of the time.

There were many acclaimed personalities who spoke about this great Romanian theologian in awe - Heidegger, Olivier Clement, Wilhelm Nyssen, if we were to name just a few.¹ The

¹ A. Plămădeală, *În loc de introducere: „Generația Stăniloae”* (Instead of introduction: “Stăniloae Generation”), in: M. Păcurariu, I. I. Ică jr. (eds.), *Persoană și Comuniune. Prinos de cinstire Părintelui Profesor Academician Dumitru Stăniloae la împlinirea vârstei de 90 de ani, (Person and Communion Tribute to Professor Academician Father Dumitru Stăniloae’s 90th birthday)*, (Sibiu: Editura Arhiepiscopiei, 1993), pp. XI-XXI.

uniqueness and originality of his broad and complex theological enterprise² lies, first of all, in that he knew how to break the rigid underlying structures of scholastic schemes and then to promote a reinvigorating return to the Patristic theological discourse, by advancing a spiritual and ascetically mystical approach to Orthodox dogmas. In this context, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae has providentially focused primarily on what he thought was a first rank priority: the theological and spiritual rediscovery and revalorisation of *hesychasm*, and in particular, of the writings of Saint Gregory Palamas. This was the starting point for the profound Philokalic and Neopatristic renaissance that the great Transylvanian theologian wanted to assert in the Romanian theology, as a counterpoint to the negative influences borne by the Scholasticism and Pietism of his age.

What ensued, was an enormous and steady flow of labour from his part, designed to bring into the Romanian spirituality the 12 volumes of the Philokalia, as well as commented translations of almost all the fundamental works of the Greek Patristics. The writings of Saint Maximos the Confessor, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Cyril of Alexandria, and those of Saint Dionysus the Areopagite were gradually becoming more and more accessible to the Romanian theological world, in this Father's novel attempt to creatively restore the Patristic thinking patterns.³

Fr. Stăniloae's theological maturity would however come to light in his theological synthesis between Dogmatics, Spirituality and Liturgy, which he had long thought out and

² On the defining aspects of Fr. Stăniloae's work, see: I. I. Ică jr., *De ce „Persoană și comuniune?” Cuvânt prevenitor la un „Festschrift” întârziat, (Why “Person and Communion?” Cautioning word to a belated “Festschrift”)*, in: M. Păcurariu, I. I. Ică jr. (eds.), *Persoană și Comuniune*, pp. XXIV-XXVII.

³ K. Ware, *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, in: A. Hastings, A. Mason, H. Pyper (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.185.

prepared through the profound studies published between the 1950s and the 1970s. This unique trilogy was initiated by the issuance of the *Course in Orthodox Asceticism and Mysticism*, published in 1946-1947, which was then seen as an attempt to tackle a “theological mysticism”, or as a “theology of the spiritual life”, one that was meant to “fill the void between Dogmatic and Moral Theology” and have them culminate in their praxis.⁴

The second part in Fr. Stăniloae's theological trilogy is represented by the printing of the three volumes of his *Dogmatic Theology*⁵, wherein the great theologian programmatically set his mind to leave aside “the scholastic method of treating dogmas as abstract statements of a purely theological interest”, as he embarked on a quest “to discover the spiritual significance of dogmatic teachings, and to highlight their truth in relation to the thorough needs of a soul in search of salvation.”⁶

The book *Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy*, published in 1986, was intended to crown Fr. Stăniloae's work, as the final part in his theological triptych⁷, which - as the man himself stated - would merge doctrine, spirituality and the

⁴ D. Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă. Ascetica și mistica*, (*Orthodox Spirituality Orthodox Asceticism and Mysticism*), (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, from here IBMBOR, 1992), pp. 5-7. This book is a reprint of the 1946-47 *Course in Orthodox Asceticism and Mysticism*, which had previously been republished in 1981, under the generic title *Orthodox Spirituality*, as the third volume of the course in Orthodox Moral Theology.

⁵ Idem, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, for the Theological Institutes), vol. 3 (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1978), pp. 504.380.466.

⁶ Idem, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, vol. 1, (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1978), p. 5.

⁷ J. Henkel, *Îndumnezeire și etică a iubirii în opera părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae, (Godmanhood and the Ethics of Love in the Work of Father Dumitru Stăniloae)*, (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2006), p. 336.

liturgical experience into one unique and personal theological discourse.⁸

His complex and integral vision on the Holy Liturgy comprises all the dimensions of life in the church; it constitutes the object of this study, which intends to re-interpret and systematise evaluatively the main themes related to the importance of the Eucharistic Synax in the life of the Church, such as it is depicted in Fr. Stăniloae's works. The programmatic urge to evaluate the writings of this great theologian - an action launched in 1993 by Archdeacon Prof. Ioan I. Ică jr., in the preface to the memorial volume dedicated to the one who had not long before passed away - is still ongoing, for even today the Romanian theology lacks an "authentic, solid, systematic reception" of Fr. Stăniloae's practical and theoretical work, a work that is now, just as it was 20 years ago, "more often cited than read and actually analysed".⁹

Without any doubt, the writings of Fr. Stăniloae on the Holy Liturgy are an inestimable treasure still waiting to be discovered, systematised and evaluated. Yet, such an endeavour is a slow process, due to the complexity, pluripotentiality and depth of the themes that he addressed. In this respect, any attempt to perform a preliminary evaluation of Fr. Stăniloae's pursuits in the field of Liturgical Theology must start from the premise that this great man was not a liturgist in the classical sense of the word, but a complex and profound theologian, who managed to grasp and experience the unity between dogma and spirituality, as a spiritual reality in the ritualistic life of the Church. His view of the Liturgy is fascinating and complete in its

⁸ K. Chr. Felmy, *Die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart. Eine Einführung*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), p. 6. See the Romanian translation by I. Ică: Karl Chr. Felmy, *Dogmatica experienței eclesiale. Înnoirea teologiei ortodoxe contemporane, (Dogmatic ecclesiastical experience The renewal of contemporary Orthodox Theology)*, (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 1999).

⁹ I. I. Ică jr., *De ce „Persoană și comuniune?”*, p. XXIV.

depth: the Eucharistic celebration is, in Fr. Stăniloae's opinion, only the visible dimension of the eternal Liturgy of love within the Holy Trinity, Whose Altar, Oblation and High Priest is Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb, Who keeps in a state of permanent sacrifice, Who was incarnate, Who died and arose again, and sent His Holy Spirit in the Church, so as to radiate among those who open up to Him in faith, and thus saturate them with the dynamism of His own surrender to the Father. Through this dynamism of expiatory love He wants to gather all in Himself, to impregnate them with His sacrificial love, and then bring them all before the Father. 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 substantiates Himself, and then extends His expiatory Body and Blood to the faithful, so as to bring all those who believe in Him/His devotees before the Father, in a state of pure sacrifice.

The dynamism of His altruistic love, available to all the faithful through the Holy Sacraments, reaches its efficiency only in the extension and application of the said sacrificial love among people, through a life of ascetism and self-restraint, which is a generator of acts of kindness and alms-giving. Thus, the entire human life becomes an exchange of gifts between man and God: the Creator and Maker of all gives Himself to the man as a love oblation, through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, and thus empowers the man to give himself to the Father with and in Christ, and to extend this love dialogue to all of his neighbours.

The definitions that Fr. Stăniloae gives to the Holy Liturgy illustrate this profound, complete and complex vision on the reality of the eternal life that is manifest in this world through the rituals of the Church. The Eucharistic Synax is thus defined as: "The Kingdom of the Holy Trinity, the intimate godly home

that comprises all"¹⁰, "the movement of a community in the sacrificial spirit of Christ, and its advancement into the love realm shared by the Holy Trinity"¹¹, "the ascent of creation en route to perfection and towards the glorification of the Holy Trinity, through the sacrifice of the incarnate Son, and through its partaking of this sacrifice"¹², "the celebration that generates the union and communion between us and God"¹³ wherein the Holy Trinity is present "as the consummate structure and source of love that stands at the basis of the Son's incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection, which brought about our salvation, our adoption and eventually, our own resurrection"¹⁴, "our act of sacrifice that is synchronous with Christ's, or His merger with the community, which is done in a state of sacrifice and in order to bring the latter along as a living oblation to the Father, so that the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity would mature within all."¹⁵

With these synthetic definitions of the Holy Liturgy I will proceed to present, to analyse and to systematise the main themes that make up the foundation of this complex and profound view on the Eucharistic Synax.

2 The Holy Trinity as Structure of Supreme Love, and the Holy Liturgy

The Greek term λειτουργία signifies the common ministration of the people, and it is a compound of two nouns, namely:

¹⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă, (Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy)*, (Craiova: Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, 1986), p. 375

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 5.

¹² Ibidem, p. 299.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 327.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 257.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 137.

ἔργον, meaning deed, act, work, profession, and λήϊτος, which derives from ληός - or λαός, in the Attic dialect -, which defines any public service or work done for the state or the people. The verb λειτουργεῖν translates as “doing something for the people”, while λειτουργία was known to signify an action, or a work done for the benefit of the people.¹⁶ It is this meaning of the word that was utilised in the Old and the New Testaments¹⁷, only they employed it in analogy with the significance that the noun used to have in Antiquity.

The Early Christianity used the term “Liturgy” in order to give a blanket name to the sum of all those rituals that men of faith employed so as to express either their gratefulness or gratitude towards God, or God's sanctifying work for the people.¹⁸ In time though, this notion came to signify exclusively the consecration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.¹⁹

As a well-known theologian of the Holy Trinity, Fr. Stăniloae had a broader and deeper understanding of the λειτουργία notion. He viewed the Liturgy as the communion of eternal love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity, which all creatures are called to immerse into through grace, a communion that had

¹⁶ P. Vintilescu, *Liturghierul explicat, (The Hieratikon explained)*, (București: EIBMBOR, 1972), p. 140.

¹⁷ In the Septuagint, the verb “λειτουργεῖν” is used 42 times and with the exclusive meaning of rituals belonging the church service brought before God. King Josiah tells the Levites: “Now serve (λειτουργεῖν) the Lord your God and His people Israel” 2 Chronicles 35, 3. This very meaning of service brought to God is employed when this verb is used in the New Testament: Luke 1,8-10; Acts 13,2; Hebrews 9,21. The term λειτουργία appears in the Pauline Epistles in connection with the Saviour's sacerdotal office, such as mentioned in Hebrews 8,2 ; 5, 1,4. See also: P. Vintilescu, *Liturghierul explicat*, p. 140.

¹⁸ G. Dix, *The Shape of Liturgy*, Londra, 1945, p. IX; D. Ciobotea, *Liturghie Euharistică și Filantropie creștină - necesitatea unității dintre ele, (Eucharistic Liturgy and Christian Philanthropy - their need for unity)*, in: Candela Moldovei XII (2003), no. 10, p. 4.

¹⁹ R. Taft (ed.), *Liturgy*, in: A. P. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 1240-1241.

been granted to the first people in Heaven and then made available to all Christians through the Saviour's Crucifixion and Resurrection, and through the Holy Spirit's descent and activity inside the Church.²⁰

The consummate love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity, as a perfect communion between three "I's" Who are co-inherent to one another, is in fact a love essentially linked to God, just like its manifestation is, which means that "God has always been a shared act of love, as large as His absoluteness and His unblemished subjectivity. In perfect love persons do not merely engage in a reciprocal ex-change of self; they also affirm themselves reciprocally and personally, and establish themselves in existence through giving and receiving. But the divine love is all efficacious. (...) The acts, via which the divine Persons affirm one another reciprocally in existence through perfect love, are eternal acts and have a totally personal character, although they are acts in which the divine Persons are active together."²¹

The love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity is perfect and based on the complete self-giving of a divine "I" to another divine "I", a self-giving where the "I" does not offer a part of Himself or of His possessions, but where the "I" offers His own complete Self. This giving and receiving exchange happening within the Holy Trinity, by which the reciprocal accommodation of the divine "I's" is done, epitomizes the consummate communion, the ultimate unity. In this completely selfless love, the divine Persons not only give Themselves to and accept one another reciprocally, but They also affirm one another in a mutual and personal manner, kindle each other into existence

²⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă, (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, vol II, (București: EIBMBOR, 1978), p. 221. See also: R. Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la divine Liturgie du VII-e siècle*, (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1966), p. 36.

²¹ D. Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime, Structura supremei iubiri, (The Holy Trinity, Structure of consummate love)*, in: *Studii Teologice* 5-6 (1970), p. 336.

through acts of giving and receiving, in a perpetual and eternal Liturgy.²²

Fr. Stăniloae's greatest merit is that of having highlighted the fact that only a Trinity of divine Persons can experience complete communion in/of love, as not one of the three divine Subjects sees anything as object in the Persons of the others, nor in Himself, but rather experiences the other two within Himself as pure Subjects.²³ These are the consciousnesses of three subjects perfectly interior to one another, and God's divine love and happiness is rooted in the reality that, "within the Holy Trinity, each 'I' who is the all contains the other 'I's' who are themselves also the all, each being the all in this reciprocal act of containing."²⁴

Full communion comes about only between Persons who are and make themselves transparent as pure subjects, who mutually give Themselves to one another. The completeness of divine love and its unique character make it impossible to have within the Holy Trinity an "I" asserting Himself over against another 'I'; instead, each divine Person sees Himself only in relation to the other two Persons, because neither one wants to disclose his own "I" but two together reveal the other; nor does each pair of Persons disclose their own 'I's', but they always place the Third "I" in the forefront. Thus, "the Character of the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit is to love by eclipsing Himself, as the Father forgetting Himself loves the Son in Whom He has placed all His joy, and as the Son is beloved because He puts off his own 'I' in order that the Father may be made manifest and the Spirit shine forth."²⁵

Thus, for Fr. Stăniloae, the Holy Trinity is "the culmination of the humility and sacrifice of love", for "It represents the

²² Idem, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol 1, p. 296.

²³ Ibidem, p. 300.

²⁴ Idem, *Sfânta Treime, Structura supremei iubiri*, p. 342.

²⁵ E. Kovalevsky, *Sainte Trinité*, in : Cahiers de Saint Irénée 44 (1964), p. 3.

continual mortification of each 'I', for it is the self-assertion of these 'I's' that would make the absolute unity of love impossible, and thus give birth to individualism".²⁶ To understand and experience this love, an ascetic effort has to be made, for "it is the sin of individualism that hinders us from understanding fully that the Holy Trinity is a complete identification of 'I's" without their disappearance or destruction."²⁷

The love of the Holy Trinity is one that excludes any form of egocentric affirmation, for only because a third divine "I" exists can the other two "I's" become one, not merely through the reciprocity of their love alone, but also through their common self-forgetfulness in favour of the third.²⁸ It is only through the Third that the love between the two proves itself generous and capable of extending itself to subjects outside themselves, and only the existence of a Third in God explains the creation of a world of many "I's" and the fact that these "I's" have been elevated to the level of partners with God.²⁹

It is only through the Holy Spirit, that the generous divine love radiates to other creatures, as well. In this respect, Fr. Stăniloae states that, "the name of the Holy Spirit is so closely associated with love, inasmuch as that name is the sign of perfect love in God. Only the third implies complete deliverance of love from selfishness. Through the Holy Spirit the love of the Trinity proves itself as genuinely holy. The Holy Spirit represents the possibility of extending the love between Father and Son to other subjects, and at the same time he represents the right which a third has to a part in the loving dialogue of the two, a right with which the Spirit invests created subjects."³⁰

²⁶ D. Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime, Structura supremei iubiri*, p. 343.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 346.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol 1, p. 309.

Thus God created the world and all rational beings out of, and for this infinite and self-forgetful love, as He wanted to extend the communion of love existent between the divine Persons to all those conscious creatures that would be able to respond to it in kind.

Fr. Stăniloae understands the sacrificial, selfless, generous, and disinterested love of the Holy Trinity, which the Godhead wanted to plant in and communicate to all rational created beings as principle, foundation, and purpose of the entire economy of salvation. "As a work of raising up believers to intimate communion with God, salvation and deification is nothing other than the extension to conscious creatures of the relations that are between the divine Persons."³¹

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, human being has been given the mission to gather the whole cosmos around himself and return it 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 woman.³²

However, the fall into sin has brought about a deviation of the human being from this synthesizing mission, and (s)he is now bereft of the Heavenly Liturgy, and of the communion with the Holy Trinity. Man's return to the joy of this communion was accomplished through the Incarnation, Sacrifice and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Who brought upon the earth all celestial riches, the whole divine truth, and the entire heavenly joy that the initial disobedience had lost.³³ Only a Sacrifice could restore

³¹ Ibidem, p. 286.

³² St. Maximos the Confessor, *Answers to Thalassios 1, 20, 22, 42, 49*, in: D. Stăniloae (ed.), *Filocalia*, vol. 3, Bucuresti: Editura Harisma, 1994²), pp. 16-20; pp. 59-62; pp. 69-76; pp. 146-149; pp. 179-195.

³³ St. Gregory the Theologian, *Sermon 44*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXVI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1858), p. 612B; idem, *On the Feast of Baptism of the Lord*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.),

the man to the communion of love within the Holy Trinity, and that is why the Son of God became the Son of man, and by dying on the Cross, He emerged as the eternal High Priest, the perpetual Oblation, and the utmost 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 considered by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae as the heavenly foundation of the Holy Liturgy that is performed through sensible means within the Church, for "the entire Liturgy that is celebrated in the Church is Christ's sacrifice intermingled with our own oblation, enlivened by the power of His Sacrifice. Our offer culminates in the Eucharist, representing Christ's giving of Himself to the Father and to us, which is not done without our prayers that also nourish on the Saviour's heavenly Sacrifice."³⁴

Fr. Stăniloae's entire work is built on a central leitmotif - the self-sacrificing love of the Holy Trinity, which was uncovered and made accessible to the man via the state of perpetual sacrifice that our Saviour Jesus Christ is in. This love is the most important aspect of the sacramental life of the Church - whether or not it is properly understood determines the way the liturgical ritual is received and experienced as "Christ's sacrifice for us and our participation in it".³⁵

The fundamental premise on which the great Transylvanian theologian bases his attempt to understand and experience the

Patrologiae cursus completus (Tomus XXXVI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1858), p. 325 AD.

³⁴ D. Stăniloae, *Jertfa lui Hristos și spiritualizarea noastră prin împărtășirea de ea în Sfânta Liturghie, (Christ's Sacrifice and our Spiritualisation through Partaking of It at the Holy Liturgy)*, in: *Ortodoxia* 1 (1983), p. 108.

³⁵ Idem, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină, (Eucharist and Christian love)*, in: *Studii Teologice* 1-2 (1965), p. 3.

depths of the Holy Liturgy is that “we cannot bring ourselves as sacrifices to the Father outside Christ, the High Priest and source Sacrifice, neither does Christ give Himself as a sacrifice in separation from us, for He has placed Himself in a state of sacrifice solely for our sake.”³⁶

Starting from his translation of the works by Saint Cyril of Alexandria, and delving deep into this great saint's Christology, Fr. Stăniloae stresses throughout almost all of his own work the importance of the fact that Christ is forever in the state of sacrifice and only such a continuous and immaculate sacrifice devoid of any egotism, can give to the Christians the power to bring themselves as pure sacrifices to God the Father.³⁷

3 Entering the Communion of Love within the Holy Trinity through the Sacrifice of the Saviour

The depths of the theological concept of “state of pure sacrifice”, which is so often employed by Fr. Stăniloae, requires a detailed analysis. Hence the following chapters focus on a series of theological themes that are enclosed in this concept: *the necessity* of the sacrifice in order to reconcile men with God, *the object of the sacrifice*, *the very act of sacrifice*, *the person being sacrificed*, *the dynamism of the sacrificial state* pointed both toward God and toward the human nature and the humankind, *the sampling of the state of sacrifice* that Christ's human nature experiences in the Eucharistic Synax, and *man's appropriation and synchronous sacrifice* with Christ in the Liturgy after the Liturgy, through a life of ascetics and observance of the holy commandments.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Idem, Introduction to Saint Cyril of Alexandria, in: idem (ed.), Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Scrieri, partea I, Închinarea și slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, (Părinți și scriitori bisericești 38, București: EIBMBOR, 1991), p. 9.

3.1 The Reason of Offering: the need for a Living, Pure and Untarnished Sacrifice in order to enter before the Father

The idea of sacrifice is an essential element of any religion, and it has been understood as the effort men make so as to enter a communion with God, their act of self-giving in response to the Creator's gift to them, the path towards a freely granted communion with God, and also the expiation and removal of sin, as well as men's reconciliation with God.³⁸

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.³⁹

The consummate sacrifice would later be brought by Christ, the complete offering being His very own Person. Fr. Stăniloae writes that His Sacrifice "is a human person of an infinite value, for this human person is also a divine Person"⁴⁰, 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. The animal does not consciously experience the pain of shedding its blood like the

³⁸ C. Galeriu, *Jertfă și răscumpărare, (Sacrifice and Redemption)*, (București: Editura Harisma, 1993), p. 11.

³⁹ D. Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

incarnate Son does. For Fr. Stăniloae “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.”⁴¹

Fr. Stăniloae insists very much on the fact that the Substance of the sacrifice brought for the forgiveness of the sins of all humankind is the forever living Offering, which was not burnt or destroyed by the fire of death, but rather sanctified and rendered worthy to be welcomed by the Father, as a sweet incensed oblation.

The sacrifice of Christ is unique and of maximum efficiency due to the fact that He 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 Father.⁴²

“Surrendering one's own self to God means infinitely more than surrendering one's possessions. 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. (...) only by attaching ourselves to Him Who brought such a sacrifice, can we also bring ourselves as living sacrifices (...) We cease living for ourselves and start living for God, by fulfilling His will that sanctifies us.”⁴³

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

⁴¹ Idem (ed.), Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Scrieri, partea I, Închinarea și slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, note 338, p. 309.

⁴² Ibidem, note 126, p. 107.

⁴³ Ibidem, note 458, p. 400.

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.”⁴⁴

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.

3.2 Christ's Sacrifice and the Entrance of His Humanity into the State of Sacrifice

The bringing of any sacrifice involves the ideas of death and sanctification.⁴⁵ In the Old Testament, to offer God animals, fruits of the earth, objects or even people, meant to have them consecrated by God and separated from their habitual usage; they died and were destroyed for this world, yet they became consecrated and sanctified once they were brought to God. Symbolically, each act of bringing a sacrifice pointed to a desire of transitioning from a material existence to a spiritual one,

⁴⁴ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus LXVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), col. 709B: “Τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὀλοκαυτώματα τῶν ζῶων ὅλα δι' ὄλων, ἱερῶ καὶ ἀσβέστῳ κατεφλέγετο πυρὶ, οὐδενὸς τὸ σύμπαν ἐξηρημένον, ἀλλ' οἰονεῖ πως παντὸς μορίου καὶ μέλους εἰς ὀσμὴν εὐωδίας ἀναβαίνοντος τῷ θεῷ (...) Πρέπει δὴ οὖν τὸ ὀλοκαυτοῦσθαι Χριστῶ· καὶ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἀληθῶς ὄλος 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: Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Scrieri, partea I, Închinarea și slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, p. 362.

⁴⁵ D. Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină*, p. 4

from an old life of sin to a new and sanctifying life of communion with God.

In other words, it indicated that the holiness that results from the relationship between the offering and God is possible only after an inferior lifestyle was terminated. In this respect, Saint Cyril of Alexandria calls the object offered to God either a victim (θύμα), or a sacred object (ιερείον), and the act of bringing it either offering (θύειν), or consecrating (ιερουργεῖν): “It is just like in an icon, we consecrate our souls to God through victims, and thus we move into a life that is holy and untarnished.”⁴⁶

However, the sacrifices of the Old Testament were mere antetypes and symbols foreshadowing the true sacrifice that would be Christ's. Through these, men could not entirely get over their inferior and selfish modes of being, and their bringing of offerings to God rather showed their wish to be delivered from the debt of a sacrifice they understood as death, or as a complete surrender to God.

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

⁴⁶ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, col. 769B: „Οιονεὶ γὰρ πῶς ἐν εἰκόνι τοῖς θύμασι τὰς ἑαυτῶν ἱερουργοῦμεν ψυχὰς, καὶ θεῷ προσάγομεν, ἀποθνήσκοντες μὲν τῷ κόσμῳ, καὶ τῷ φρονεῖν τὰ σαρκὸς, καὶ παθῶν νέκρωσιν ὑπομένοντες, μόνον δὲ οὐχὶ συσταυρούμενοι τῷ Χριστῷ, ἵνα πρὸς ἀγίαν καὶ ἀμώμητον μεταχωροῦντες ζῶην, κατὰ τὸ αὐτῷ δοκοῦν πολιτευώμεθα.”

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 love.⁴⁷

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."⁴⁸

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). Fr. 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 of 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."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ D. Stăniloae, *Jertfa lui Hristos și spiritualizarea noastră prin împărtășirea de ea în Sfânta Liturghie*, p. 106.

⁴⁸ Idem, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Idem, *Iisus Hristos, Arhiereu în veac, (Jesus Christ, Eternal High Priest)*, in: *Ortodoxia* 2 (1979), p. 218.

The Son of God is being perpetually surrendered to the Father out of love, and this love - a ceaseless offering of the Self - has shown itself as an ensanguined sacrifice, due to the conditions man created by falling into sin. By dying on the Cross, the Saviour gives Himself consummately as a Man to the Father, and through this, He impregnates His human nature with the intensity of the offering of the self to God.

This state of perpetual sacrifice that the humanity of Christ is in is no longer connected to death in His forever-living Person. Rather, it is a state of resurrection and holiness of the new deified life, the spring and source "for all the degrees of the state of sacrifice the faithful are in, degrees that would include both the death to egoism, and the holiness of a new life, a life of resurrection."⁵⁰

According to Stăniloae, "he who does not give himself entirely and forever, does not give himself completely, for it is only in this perpetuity that Christ's sacrifice shows completeness and the power to make others perfect".⁵¹ Only Jesus Christ made it possible for man to enter before the Father in a state of pure sacrifice, and to anchor in it forever, for the eternal power to overcome any human egoism comes solely through Him.⁵²

3.3 The Person who brings the Offering - Christ, High Priest, Perpetual Sacrifice and Altar above the Heavens

Another defining element for the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice is His Person, the One Who 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

⁵⁰ Idem, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină*, p. 11.

⁵¹ Idem, *Jertfa lui Hristos și spiritualizarea noastră prin împărtășirea de ea în Sfânta Liturghie*, p. 108.

⁵² St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Închinarea și slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, note 567 of D. Stăniloae, p. 512.

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.

Fr. 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 untemper 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.⁵³

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, i.e. the Altar above the heavens, for He could not raise His sacrifice closer to God 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 Father.⁵⁴

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

⁵³ Ibidem, note 125, p. 106. Stăniloae writes: "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. (...) 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."

⁵⁴ Ibidem, note 312, p. 292.

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 to 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 rebound/lapse.”⁵⁵

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

⁵⁵ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, col. 620C-621A: Ἐν ἀποστροφῇ γὰρ ὄντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον, καὶ προσκεκρουκότα Θεῷ διὰ τὴν παράβασιν καὶ πολλὴν ἀμαρτίαν, ἔστησε πάλιν ἐν προσώπῳ τοῦ Πατρὸς ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ πρώτῳ Χριστός. “Πρόδρομος γὰρ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν εἰσβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, νῦν ἐμφανισθῆναι τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν,” καθὰ γράφει Παῦλος ἡμῖν ὁ σοφός. Ὁ γὰρ ὑπάρχων αἰετὰ μετὰ τοῦ ἰδίου Πατρὸς, νῦν ἐμφανισθῆναι λέγεται ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ γε καὶ πρώτῳ παρατιθείς ἐν ὄψει τοῦ Πατρὸς τὰ ἀνθρώπινα, καὶ τὴν ἀρχαίαν ἐκείνην ἀποστροφὴν μεθιστάς.

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.⁵⁶

3.4 The Dynamism of Christ's State of Sacrifice and its Movement towards God the Father, towards the Human Nature, and towards all Human Beings

The state of perpetual sacrifice that Christ's human nature stays in is for Fr. Stăniloae the heavenly foundation to any sacramental act of the Church. 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."⁵⁷ 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

⁵⁶ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Închinarea și slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, note 390, p. 346. Fr. Stăniloae underlines that "solely Christ 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 to the sacrificial love of the human nature, now saved from the unfeeling thickness of sinful egoism."

⁵⁷ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol 2, p. 131.

compassion that he has for all of those who open up to Him in faith.

3.4.1 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 sacrifice, which was first carried out in Christ and then extended through Him in all of those who believe in Him.

Fr. Stăniloae takes the ideas of Fr. Romanidis and Fr. 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."⁵⁸

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

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 131.

state of sacrifice, Christ did not only secure a juridical ransom for us, but He reaped a holy ransom, one the sanctifies and cleanses us (Heb. 9, 12—13).

The juridical ransom/satisfaction 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 faith.⁵⁹

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.”⁶⁰

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 and a gift is the sign of love. He is the

⁵⁹ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*, note 570, p. 516.

⁶⁰ Idem, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, col. 708BC: Αὐτὸς δὲ ἡμῶν καρποφορία πρώτη καὶ ἐξαιρετος· προσκεκόμικε γὰρ ἑαυτὸν εἰς θυσίαν τῷ Πατρὶ, καὶ οὐχ ὑπὲρ γε μᾶλλον ἑαυτοῦ, κατὰ τὸν ἀνωμήτως ἔχοντα λόγον, ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τῶν ὑπὸ ζυγὸν καὶ γραφὴν ἁμαρτίας. Καθ’ ὁμοιότητα δὲ τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸν, ἱερὰ θύματα καὶ ἡμεῖς, κόσμῳ μὲν ἀποθνήσκοντες, ὡς νενεκρωμένης τῆς ἁμαρτίας ἐν ἡμῖν, ζῶντες δὲ τῷ Θεῷ, τὴν ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ ὁσιότητι ζωὴν.

complete gift or perfect sacrifice, Who brings Himself to the Father for us and with us, and not as an object, but as a Subject”.⁶¹ 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.”⁶²

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.”⁶³

3.4.2 *The Saviour's sacrifice restores the human nature and fashions 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 Fr. 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

⁶¹ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*, note 415, p. 361.

⁶² D. Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină*, p. 14.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

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. (...) 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."⁶⁴

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. Fr. 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.⁶⁵

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.

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 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

⁶⁴ D. Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină*, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

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.

The mystery of salvation is for Fr. Stăniloae 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-giving.⁶⁶ In his opinion, everything in the relationship between man and God is 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

⁶⁶ S. Dumitrescu, *Șapte dimineți cu Părintele Stăniloae, (Seven mornings with Father Stăniloae)*, (București: Editura Anastasia, 1992), pp. 22. 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".

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.

The material symbols utilized in the rituals of the Church make the entire mystery of salvation available to all people while they are still in flesh. At the Holy Liturgy, Christ, the High Priest Who keeps into a permanent state of sacrifice while He amasses the sacrifices of all the faithful in order to put them together with His own before the Father, makes this mystical reality visible via the ritualistic acts performed by the hierarchy of the Church who serve as intercessors, through which He offers His sacrifice before the eyes of the congregation, a sacrifice that is bloodless and delicately vested in the robe of the liturgical symbol.

4 The Holy Liturgy as Mystery of Person and Communion

Up until now, the current study has proven that the Eucharistic Synax is, in Fr. Stăniloae's theological universe, only a visible manifestation that is accessible to the man through earthly matter and the ritual of Christ's perpetual Self-offering to the Father that takes place in the heaven's Holy of Holies. The Saviour's perpetual state of sacrifice is the heavenly foundation to any sacramental act of the Church. Christ is active and manifest throughout the entire ritual of the Church, for He offers His sacrifice in a real manner via the liturgical symbol and matter, in order to impress upon all the faithful the dynamism of His state of complete surrender to the Father.

The whole ritual of the Holy Liturgy is seen by Fr. Stăniloae as an extension and objectivation of Christ's eternal act of self-giving and of drawing all rational beings into His sacrificial state. Christ is living and manifest through the matter of the

Eucharistic sacrifice and in the liturgical acts, wherein He exerts his High Priesthood in this world by subjecting to the senses “His sacrificing of Self to the Father and His dwelling as sacrifice amongst us, so that we may also bring ourselves to the heavenly Father as offerings embedded in His sacrifice”.⁶⁷

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae's commentary on the Holy Liturgy has often been understood as an expression of the absolute unity between “doctrine, theology and liturgical experience”⁶⁸ and “the consistently Trinitarian and Christological explanation of the entire ritualistic event” enframes his thorough theology of the person, of love and communion.⁶⁹

Beyond his vast theological excursions, which often give the impression that the ritualistic acts are interpreted as felicitous pretexts to advance and explore further certain dogmatic or spiritual themes, and beyond the wish to reconcile the two schools of interpretation of the Holy Liturgy - i.e. the School of Alexandria, which sees the Church, the Mysteries and particularly the Holy Liturgy as projections of certain celestial realities, and the School of Antioch that places a greater emphasis on the relationship between the Holy Mysteries and Liturgy, and the events in Jesus Christ's earthly life – Fr. Stăniloae invariably pursues his complete and cosmic view of the Holy Liturgy, which he sees as *the act that grants redemptive efficiency to the state of perpetual sacrifice that Christ, our eternal High Priest is in.*

What is really striking in this great theologian's explanation and interpretation of liturgical acts is the fact that everything is perceived as having been touched by the uninterrupted abidance of the Saviour in this state of sacrifice. His eternal and perpetually dynamic sacrifice gives a purpose to the human being and shapes the communion with God and with other

⁶⁷ Idem, *Iisus Hristos, Arhiereu în veac*, p. 220.

⁶⁸ K. Chr. Felmy, *Die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart. Eine Einführung*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ J. Henkel, *Îndumnezeire și etică*, p. 338.

human beings. All the liturgical acts have an impact in the personal and ethical ascetic plane, as well as in the common, communitary and eschatological one.

The invisible presence of Christ increases gradually until it reaches the point where the Lamb on the diskos in the visible altar becomes the Lamb-Christ, Who is perpetually sacrificed on the heavenly altar. Since Christ, the great and eternal Oblation is the Sacrifice of a Subject, and not of an object, as it is replete with sentience and in complete surrender to God the Father, in the same way the sacrifice and the Eucharistic ritual are impregnated with the presence of Christ as their Subject who desires to communicate Himself to others in His sacrificial love, so as to bring them along with Himself to the Father.

The visible ritual of the Church is more than a representation separated from an action that is performed on the invisible plane. Throughout the entire Eucharistic Synax, it is present and active in Christ, Who does not do without the movements of the priest's hands, without the liturgical gestures, chants, and prayers of the community, or without the visible liturgical matter during the Mystery of Transubstantiation, but Who rather perfects them and makes them divinely efficient.

The sequent paragraphs proceed to analyse the central moments of the Holy Liturgy, just as they are presented in the volume *Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy*, which is a theologically mature volume that comprises, in a synthetic way, the most important themes that Fr. Stăniloae wrote about.

4.1 The Prothesis as Ritual of Pre-bringing of the Gifts for Christ's Holy Sacrifice

In his description of the ritual of bringing the gifts for the Holy Liturgy starts Fr. Stăniloae from the historical data contained in

the commentaries made by the liturgists⁷⁰ of the age, and then proceeds to find the symbolic significance of each liturgical act that is performed during the Prothesis, and to prove their eschatological efficiency.

The entire ritual of pre-bringing of the gifts is approached from a hermeneutic Antiochian standpoint - as an iconic presentation of the Saviour's life, wherein all the acts the priest performs bring to the forefront the themes of the Infant and of the slain Lamb, as well as from an Alexandrian point of view - as an eschatological realism that is present and manifest in rituals through the power of symbols.

Fr. Stăniloae's new guidelines and method of liturgical analysis become obvious from the very first pages of his liturgical commentary. In this volume, he tried to capture all the angles that the Holy Liturgy could be interpreted from, and he genuinely managed to imprint the consistency of the eschatological Alexandrian realism onto the Antiochian typological symbolism. In his opinion, the enacted rituals of the Church could be icons of the Saviour's life, for it is in them and through them that Christ's Person - in Which all the events of His life are in a state of permanent currentness - is present and active.

Fr. Stăniloae sees the preparation of the Holy Gifts as the mystical reality that is iconized through the liturgical symbol, wherein Christ first appears as "pro-present" (a term that belongs exclusively to Fr. Stăniloae), only to make His presence more and more evident and intense, until He arrives at His consummate parousia, which is materialised in the bread and wine that become His Body and Blood:

"At the Holy Liturgy, Christ is there with us even before and beside the transubstantiation moment, when the bread and

⁷⁰ R. F. Taft, S.J., *The Great Entrance, A History of the Transfer of Gifts and other Preanaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrisostomos* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 200, Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1975).

wine become His Body and Blood. (...) Prothesis is more than a preparation of the gifts that are to become Christ's sacrifice, for it also represents a certain pro-bringing or pro-presence of the sacrificed Christ."⁷¹

Beyond the typological symbolism of each act in the Prothesis, Fr. Stăniloae also sees its *eschatological efficiency*. Throughout everything the priest does, Christ is present in His entirety, with the whole of His work and in such a manner, that the past, present and future become condensed in Him and they do not get wasted, and the faithful "are enabled to experience all the events in the life of Christ as present and future acts. They can worship the once crucified Christ as if He were crucified at the present moment, and they can also focus on the resurrected Christ even before they give praises to the born and crucified Christ."⁷²

In explaining the symbolism of the cutting of the particles, Fr. Stăniloae insists upon the iconic character of the whole Gifts preparation ritual. The entire Church is tropologically represented on the Holy Diskos, and is symbolically gathered around the slain Lamb, just as depicted in the Book of Revelation (Revel. 5, 9-14). The sensibility laden Offering sits in the midst of the Church, full of delicacy, and in a state of availability to God that is also illustrated by the symbolism of the bread, which is an aliment leavened with man's labour, sweat and self-sacrifice, a nourishment for the human body that is called to become a sacrifice to God.⁷³

The cutting of the particles for the Theotokos and the saints, as well as the liturgical formulas uttered upon the occasion by the priest, show that the triumphant heavenly Church is likewise glorified through the Transubstantiation of the Gifts, for it constantly enjoys its fruits.⁷⁴

⁷¹ D. Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă*, p. 110.

⁷² Ibidem, p. 113.

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 116.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 123.

For Fr. Stăniloae, the explanation of the cutting of particles for the living and for the dead afforded an opportunity for an excursus on the significance of the name and on how important it is to call every person by name during the Prothesis. By reciting the names of all the saints and the faithful, both living and departed, a mystical connection is established between all those remembered and those who remember them, for “when they are recollected and brought before the living Christ in prayer, Christ Himself brings [the ones recalled] in a certain connection with Him, and by this He pulls them into a greater bond with us.”⁷⁵

As the name is “not only a concentrated expression of one person's traits, but also an expression of its unique core”, when the priest reads aloud the name of a person in prayer, he “places the person's self in vibration, for then he touches its very live and tangible uniqueness.”⁷⁶ All the faithful are remembered by name at the cutting of each particle, which is the visible symbol of their act of bringing their every breath and their own lives with Christ to the Father. This sacrifice, along with the bringing of gifts that is thus represented symbolically yet with real efficiency on the eschatological plane, is placed on the Holy Diskos around the Lamb, in order to “become the herald of Christ's love and of their love for Him, as it is pierced by God's kindness right then and there.”⁷⁷

The bread earned by the effort of living a life for God is thereby offered with and in Christ to the Father, only to be returned to the giver as a novel and renewed life, replete with the Holy Spirit. In both a symbolic and a material manner, it is evident that Christ's Self-giving to the Father is not the only offering on the Holy Diskos, since the faithful also offer themselves to God

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 125: “For as we are bound with Christ through our prayers to Him, we also find around Him the departed ones whom we remember in dutiful prayer”.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 126.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 129.

by the grace of the power of His offering, for all who are drawn by the power of His sacrificial love are always by and with Him. Consequently, "the dialogue between us and God starts at the Prothesis, like an ascension of gifts. As we go up on the ladder of gift exchange towards eternal life in God's Kingdom, we also transcend ourselves more and more."⁷⁸

4.2 The Holy Liturgy: the Common Advancement in the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity

Fr. Stăniloae uses in his interpretation of the Holy Liturgy the same analysis method: he takes each liturgical act apart for analysis - first he draws the historical markers for its genesis and evolution, then he explores the main theme of that specific liturgical moment, and in the end he integrates it in his Triadological and Christological view of the Eucharistic Synax. Right before starting his actual commentary on the Holy Liturgy, Fr. Stăniloae felt it was his duty to resolve the question why the first part of the Eucharistic Synax was and is still known today as the "Liturgy of the Word", or the "Liturgy of the Catechumens". Even if the number of those who are not baptised is insignificant in countries that are mainly Orthodox, the author proposes that the name of this first part of the Liturgy stay the same, because all the faithful are in a general sense called at all times "to immerse themselves deeper into the study of Christian teachings and hence to improve their lives accordingly"⁷⁹, as well as to journey through an uninterrupted chain of "epektasis" - i.e. through a string "of escapes from lower states and of advances into upper levels"⁸⁰, to remain Catechumens but temporarily, and to grow into the state of genuine believers.

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 132.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

The opening blessing, the first element in the Holy Liturgy, is for Fr. Stăniloae an opportunity to present his entire view on the Eucharistic Synax, which he sees as the Kingdom of love within the Holy Trinity, a kingdom of sacrificial love that the three divine Hypostases share with One Another, and which is available to all the faithful through the Saviour's sacrifice. All the concatenated liturgical acts mark the presence of a new reality that is being fostered into this world, the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven, where the entire congregation is called to ascend to in union with the crucified and resurrected Christ, as all the faithful are filled with the irradiation that comes from His presence and animated by His spontaneous and perpetual Self-surrender to the Father.

“The mystery of salvation is the mystery of love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity and us. And it is from the Holy Trinity that we drink in the love that was brought within us by the Son of God, Who became like one of us and suffered death for our sins, and Who remains in this state of absolute love forever united with us.”⁸¹

Fr. Stăniloae understands the opening of the royal doors and the utterance of the great blessing, accompanied by the sign of the holy Cross that is made with the Gospel Book over the Holy Table, as an opportunity to deliver yet another true excursus on Triadology, where he talks about the Saviour's state of sacrifice as the heavenly foundation of the Liturgy celebrated here on Earth.⁸²

Prior to his analysis of the main acts of the Holy Liturgy, Fr. Stăniloae unveils his whole view on the man's participation in the Kingdom of love that is within the Most Holy Trinity, by partaking of the sacrificial state that Jesus Christ, our Saviour is in. In this lengthy exposition of more than 30 pages, one can find a short compendium on Dogmatics that is absolutely

⁸¹ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*, note 649, p. 605.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 139.

necessary for an accurate understanding of what this great theologian of love believed and experienced with regard to the Holy Liturgy. In his opinion, the Eucharistic Synax is an anticipation of the Heavenly Kingdom: "the whole community, and not the singular believer, ascending toward the union with the crucified and resurrected Christ, is filled with the irradiation of His presence, animated by His redeeming surrender to the Father and to them."⁸³ This Kingdom of the Holy Trinity is a kingdom of perfect unity in love and consummate freedom, a Kingdom of mercy and love for people, a Kingdom of freely chosen sacrificial love that has the power to draw all into it.

By analysing the contents of the three litanies at the beginning of the Holy Liturgy and by carefully examining the three prayers that the priest reads in a low voice, Fr. Stăniloae finds that God's mercy and sacrificial love are the defining themes in all the petitions that the faithful make to the Lord during the Holy Liturgy. This boundless mercy and sacrificial love is the very Kingdom of God⁸⁴, through it God wants to bring the whole creation to Him, as reciprocal self-giving and selfless love are the only virtues able to engender perfect communion between people.

In the Primary Church, the small entrance was the moment when the high priest would enter the church, and to Fr. Stăniloae this liturgical act is yet another opportunity for him to prove his infallible theological subtlety. He thus manages to create in his liturgical commentary a perfect harmony between the Antiochian symbolism, oftentimes perceived as purely theatrical, and the depth of the Alexandrian eschatological realism, regularly understood as indistinguishable and irrelevant for the current life in the Church, and much overlooked in the contemporary liturgical writings. Therefore,

⁸³ Ibidem, p. 137.

⁸⁴ Ibidem, p. 160.

the priest's coming out with the Holy Gospel Book represents, on the one hand and in a symbolic manner, the Saviour starting His public activity, His coming out of His secluded life in order to bring the heavenly good news to the people. On the other hand, it indicates that "Christ is coming out more tangibly now, at the same time that He enters the Heavenly Altar through his service as a man, and there He stands close to the Father, thus proving that He would carry out His activity as a ministry of the Father for the people."⁸⁵

There are two planes where Christ is present: nesting in a state of perpetual sacrifice at the right hand of the Father, and resting symbolically yet genuinely in the rituals of the Church, where He increasingly unveils His live, dynamic and communion-building presence, with each liturgical act that unfolds.

The connection between the two planes, between the eternal Liturgy in Heaven and the one celebrated visibly, with the aid of liturgical symbols, is given by the spiritual life and degree of openness of each and every believer.

Fr. Stăniloae's great merit lies in that he has emphasized the necessity that the believers have personal openness and nurture a personal live and conscious relationship with Christ through ascesis and the observance of the holy commandments, in order to be able to experience the whole depth of the eschatological realism of the Holy Liturgy. Man can reach communion with God and with his neighbours only by spiritual practice. This is the sense and the possibility of deciphering and experiencing the Eucharistic Synax, as "Christ's one and only perpetual Supper in the chamber upstairs"⁸⁶, but its mystical depth is accessible only to those who open up to Him in sacrificial love, through their surrendering their lives with Him to the Father.

The chanting of the Trisagion Hymn is the liturgical moment when the whole Church - visible and invisible - praises God's

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 180.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

holiness, which is manifest in Christ, Who brought this holiness down and imprinted it onto the human nature by purifying it in the fire of sacrifice and returning it restored to the Father. Again, the bridge between the heavenly and the earthly planes is made up of the spiritual life of each member of the community, for "Only because we participate in Christ's redemptive activity through faith, and by cleansing our souls [of passions] are we deemed worthy to perceive and feel the holiness of God within us."⁸⁷

The Apostle and Gospel reading is the peak moment in the Liturgy of the Catechumens. Christ "starts His public activity" then, and becomes more and more known through His words, His presence and His activity amidst His newly chosen people. The good news of the Gospel is not merely a piece of information whose goal is to generate a simple theoretical grasp of the revealed truths, it is first and foremost the power of God at work in the hearts and souls of the faithful. It is an act, a personal intervention and presence of Christ that affirms itself and draws the faithful towards Him, and in its capacity of being the Word of the Almighty, the Gospel accomplishes and fulfils its whole message.

Fr. Stăniloae highlights the fact that there is a mystical connection between the words of the Saviour and His Person. This connection exists in such a manner, that the divine word is not an empty informative notice on His life and teaching, but it is an energy and power that springs directly from within Christ's being and right into the souls of the faithful, which He nourishes spiritually, He commands and claims for Himself, and which He fills and changes by reconfiguring them according to His model.⁸⁸

The Liturgy of the Catechumens ends with the Litany of Fervent Supplication and the Litany for the Deceased, in which God is

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 185.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 90.

implored to have mercy on all the members of the Church, both living and dead.

In His mercy, concludes Staniloae, the Creator of all does not humiliate the man, because He commiserates with him, and this mercy that He freely bestows on people is able to accomplish “the perfect inner unity that is not mistaken between God and men, and through men, between God and the cosmic nature. The foundations of unity consist not in rigid laws, but in the sacrificial love of God”.⁸⁹

4.3 The Liturgy of the Faithful, of the Sacrifice and of the Holy Communion

The main part of the Eucharistic Synax begins with the examination of the petitions for the faithful and of the two prayers that the priest reads in preparation for the bringing and consecration of the gifts into the Saviour's Body and Blood.

Fr. Stăniloae uses this occasion to reaffirm the leitmotif of his liturgical commentary: Christ is continually in a state of sacrifice, and because He experiences the fragmentation of His Body and the shedding of His Blood as an uninterrupted present that goes on forever in the eternity of His love, He wants to offer Himself with this sacrificial love through the liturgical ritual, through the prayers of the priest, and the chants of the faithful, to all who open up to Him in faith. His sacrifice is thus fully efficient, and it “reaches its completeness when it becomes imprinted in Him as an eternal state that He wishes to impress upon all of His brothers by humanity”⁹⁰

The created beings' ability to taste and partake in Christ's pure state of sacrifice through their repeated current symbolic representation of death as a sacrifice, is the very Mystery of the Eucharistic Transubstantiation. All the liturgical acts that come before the beginning of the Eucharistic Anaphora have the role

⁸⁹ Ibidem, p. 204.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 222.

to make the faithful ready to receive and experience this unique and mysterious heavenly reality.

For Fr. Stăniloae the Great Entrance is yet another moment in the Holy Liturgy, where the typological symbol attains the consistency of eschatological realism. Therefore, the priest's coming out of the holy altar is a symbol of the Saviour's entrance in Jerusalem, which epitomizes His entrance into the Heavenly Altar before the Father:

“At that moment, the community silently witness the great Mystery in awe: how the King reveals Himself historically to us and enters Jerusalem in total humility, only to be crucified on Mount Golgotha and buried; and back to their present time, how He places Himself within spiritual sight as the resurrected Christ, Who remains nonetheless in a perpetual state of sacrifice on the Heavenly Altar before the Father.”⁹¹

The placing of the Holy Gifts on the Holy Table symbolizes the placing of the Lamb who is forever slain on the Holy Altar Table that is above the Heavens. Along these, there are also the offerings brought by the faithful, and which are received by the Father as a sweet incensed oblation that comes besides Christ's greater Offering. This is again an opportunity for the great theologian to deliver a vast excursus on the Saviour's state of sacrifice, which he understands as the utmost self-offering a human being is capable of, as the sole possibility for the man to immerse himself in the live dynamics of love that is within the Holy Trinity, and as the truly one and only meeting between man and God.⁹²

The litany and the prayer read by the priest right before the Creed mark an increasingly pronounced ascent of the community towards the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity. The petitions are now more openly eschatological, as the joyful life of the eternal godly love is there for them to experience beforehand: “We pray that the Lord receive the Gifts and make

⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 229.

⁹² Ibidem, 228-237.

them worthy to be consecrated into His Body and Blood. Therefore we do not ask anything for ourselves, but we simply bring our offering to God.”⁹³

The dynamism of the gift exchange between man and God nears the peak moment of the Eucharistic Transubstantiation. Christ brings Himself continually as a sacrifice before the Father, but for His oblation to have a redeeming effect, the faithful must also bring themselves to God, with and in Christ, as living and sweet incensed sacrifices. This is beautifully expressed in the litany and prayer that are read by the priest before the Creed.

To Fr. Stăniloae, the confession of faith, i.e. the Creed is the liturgical act by which the ecclesial assembly shows, by means of rituals, *the connection between Christian love and the confession of faith*, and also the one between sacrificial love and knowledge: “As we confess our Triune God, we laud and glorify the love inside of Him and that love's irradiation in all of us, for we are all His creation.”⁹⁴

The Creed integrates synthetically all the truths of faith that the Christians are summoned to experience at the Holy Liturgy. The mystery of God's love for us, the mystery of such amazing appreciation that each person receives from God is the mystery of the good things to come, things that the Creed mentions.⁹⁵

Stăniloae consecrates a vast chapter (pp. 254-302) to the notes on the Eucharistic Anaphora, and there he manages to bind

⁹³ Ibidem, p. 243.

⁹⁴ Ibidem, p. 248.

⁹⁵ Ibidem: Stăniloae presents this eschatological orientation of the Creed by quoting an excerpt from Saint Maximos the Confessor's *Mystagogy*: “the profession of the divine Symbol of faith that is done by all represents the mysterious confession that we shall make forever and ever to God's most wise loving care for us, through the amazing reasons and modes by which we were saved. Thereby, the worthy ones present themselves replete with gratitude for the godly benevolence towards them, for there is nothing else for them to offer in exchange for the endless divine good things that are bestowed upon them”. See: St. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogy*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1865), col. 796.

liturgical symbolism with realism, Dogmatics and spirituality in a unique way. The most important moment in the Liturgy is prepared by an introductory dialogue, wherein the Holy Trinity is lauded, as everything that goes on under the mark of symbols is rooted in and justified by the love of the three divine Persons, which is poured down on the whole community through Christ's invaluable Self-sacrifice. The eternal High Priest, our Saviour is the One Who brings these gifts and the One Who consecrates them into His Body and Blood as He offers Himself with the oblations of the faithful.

“Therefore, the ‘bringing’ of gifts will have as consequence the ‘mercy of peace’ or the mercy of God’s reconciliation with us through the act of transubstantiation. Yet both the gifts and Christ’s sacrifice that allows their consecration are a sacrifice of praise brought to God.”⁹⁶

The Holy Trinity is manifest all through the Liturgy, and Their love falls gradually on the souls of the faithful, reaching its plenum at Epiklesis and upon their receiving of the Holy Communion. The ceaseless gift exchange between man and God is now at its peak.⁹⁷

The whole text of the Eucharistic Anaphora is an expression of gratitude brought before the Holy Trinity for the entire iconomy of salvation that was carried out through the incarnation of our Saviour. As One in the loving Trinity, Christ came into the world in order to restore the man to the sacrificial love of the three divine Persons.

This unfathomable descent of Christ, constantly updated at every Holy Liturgy, which allows the faithful to feel Him coming closer to any soul that opens up to him through sacrificial love,

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 255.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, p. 259: “The Trinity descends in those who ascend to God. The converging movement towards this meeting is initiated and made by both parties. The Trinity is Self-giving to those who are offering themselves to the Triune God, and to those who open up and ascend to Them.”

gives birth to the thankfulness and praise that the entire community brings to God. Yet in this experience, the faithful sense God's boundless immensity and their own inability to laud and praise Him properly. In his commentary on the Theological Prayer, Stăniloae notes that in this section of the prayer, the priest declares that the gratitude which is owed God is so much greater, as the heights from whence He descended were great, and as He did more than not desert the faithful, for He remains with them in the Church forever.

In his explanation of the paradox between the apophatism and cataphatism of God's love, the great theologian left us another written account worth to be included in the *Philokalia*, a fragment that proves the heightened state of godly sensitivity and spiritual life of the one who gave himself to Christ through his writing and through his service as a priest.⁹⁸

In the theological prayer, the entire community and the priest call with Christ upon the Father in the Holy Spirit, and thank Him for the entire economy of salvation and for being given the opportunity to thank and praise Him, as well. They also show their thankfulness for having the ability to materialize their gratitude in the gifts they bring as symbol of their inner sacrifice, gifts that stand in the altar beside the great Oblation of

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 263: "I feel contained within the knowledge of God, not as if I were an object, but as a subject is contained within a supreme Subject. I feel myself contained within a Subject endowed with will and conscience, and yet my will and conscience as a subject stay intact. I have His conscience in His containment of me. I feel myself contained within a Subject Who not only willed to think me into being, but He actually brought me into being out of nothing, and cares to preserve me forever in an intimate communion with Him, by giving me and communicating to me everything He has. And so, I feel contained within a Subject Who is filled with love for me or for all of us. (...) And see how the apophatic does not translate into knowing nothing about God, but it means to have the experience of some of His deeds that make His glory even more incomprehensible, and these two things we can express through our thoughts."⁹⁸

Christ, Who brought the highest gift, the perfect act of gratitude and consummate Eucharist ever brought to the Father.

The praise brought by the community intertwines with that sung by the angels in the biblical Trisagion hymn. In the following Christological Prayer, the priest expresses the community's whole gratitude for the entire iconomy of salvation, and thus he prepares the liturgical transition to the invocation of the Holy Spirit at the Epiklesis, for Christ's wondrous redemptive deeds that are always subsisting in His Person, are the guarantee that allows the community to plead for the descent of the Comforter on the Gifts, so that the consecration of the gifts into the Saviour's Body and Blood may take place.

Alongside these prayers, Christ's presence gradually increases, while the distance between the visible Lamb in the Holy Altar and the Lamb in the Heavenly Altar decreases.⁹⁹ In its dynamism and spontaneity, the Saviour's state of sacrifice elicits the continual outpouring of love from the Father, Who is implored at the Epiklesis to send the Holy Spirit upon the community and upon the gifts, in order to cover them completely and then include them in "the ocean of love and infinite life of the Holy Trinity."¹⁰⁰

The anamnesis of the iconomy of salvation ends with the evocation of the Saviour's Words of Institution of the Holy Eucharist, which He uttered at the table of the Mystical Supper. In commenting upon these words, Fr. Stăniloae explains how the Apostles were able to partake of Christ before He went through His passion on the Cross. This was possible because right before His death, the Saviour carried within Himself "the acute awareness of His sacrifice for us, and by this intense awareness of the sacrifice and by the Spirit that was in Him, He transfigured His Body at its core, and through this He also

⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 268.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, p. 270.

transfigured the ontological foundation of the bread, leaving only its appearance as a bread, for the sake of its organic connection with the entire cosmos before the end of times.”¹⁰¹

At the Last Supper, out of His love for the Father and for all people, Jesus experienced beforehand this state of being physically overwhelmed by His Holy Spirit, a state of death of the body, and in this state of peak spiritual awareness, He penetrated the rationale of the bread up to the point when it was absorbed into the rationale of His Body.

The consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is a mystery incomprehensible in its sense and in the way it is carried out. According to Fr. Staniloae the Holy Eucharist establishes a “special bond” between the human body and the mystical body of the divine Word. The bread and the wine are transubstantiated into the Body and the Blood of the Saviour by the assimilation of their rationale into that of Christ’s Body, and this takes place by the action of the Holy Spirit, Who “compels the Body of Christ, and through it the Hypostasis of the Word, to assimilate the rationale of the bread until complete absorption, and thus institutes the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist.”¹⁰²

That is why the Holy Spirit is called upon at the Epiklesis for the consecration of the gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ in a state of sacrifice, as they are the absolute gifts brought by the community through Christ, and by Christ to the Father. It is the culmination of the Holy Liturgy, a renewed Pentecost through which the real ontological circuit of love between the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and the community is brought to perfection, as an endless mutual gift exchange.¹⁰³ The community offers the bread and the wine as a symbol of its sacrifice and receives the Gifts consecrated into the Body and Blood of Christ, Who is permanently in a state of sacrifice.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 269.

¹⁰² Ibidem.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p. 297.

The Epiklesis is for Fr. Stăniloae the quintessential prayer of the Church, one that has utmost efficiency, because it is the absolute meeting of the man's rational ministry with the rational ministry of the Word through the Spirit, and because in it Christ does not only ask the Father - along with the priest and the whole liturgical community - that the gifts be consecrated into His Body and Blood, but He also performs the consecration. And He does that in order to offer those gifts as His own sacrifice and as the community's oblation to the Father, and then to give them back to the Church, transubstantiated into His Body and Blood, so that the faithful might be filled with His pure state of sacrifice.¹⁰⁴ This mystical heavenly reality is accessible to all the faithful, and it is lucrative only through their constant desire to attain a state of dispassion.

Fr. Stăniloae writes: "The surrender of our whole lives to Christ is the inner epiklesis visibly acted upon through deeds, an invocation (calling) of the grace of the Holy Spirit upon us".¹⁰⁵ A life offered to God and to one's brethren is the most efficient prayer, petition and plea to the Father for the grace of His Holy Spirit. "Therefore, the epiklesis is not just simply recited by the priest - continues the great theologian -, but it is celebrated by the whole body of the Church."¹⁰⁶

In the Eucharistic celebration, the whole human being, the entire liturgical community, and through them the entire creation becomes a single petition, a single prayer and plea, and in exchange they receive upon them the descent of the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal grace.¹⁰⁷ The gifts thus brought to God are not only filled with His holiness, but they are assumed "so plenary by Christ, or they are so much filled with His Spirit,

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 293.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

that they become themselves His body and blood, for they are completely and thoroughly united with His divinity.”¹⁰⁸

After the transubstantiation comes a series of petitions which remind of the most important spiritual gifts that the community expects to receive upon taking the Holy Mysteries, i.e. vigilance of soul, forgiveness of sins, fulfilment of the Kingdom of Heaven, confidence before God. Then the priest goes on with the specified list of those for whom the Eucharistic sacrifice is brought: for the saints so that they advance in God's glory, and for the living and the dead, so that their souls might be spiritually blessed. Fr. Stăniloae shows that the entire creation feeds upon Christ's sacrifice, as if it were an inexhaustible font of goods.¹⁰⁹

The moment the Lord's Prayer is recited represents, for Fr. Stăniloae, the visible sign of the adoption that the faithful receive in the Kingdom of love within the Holy Trinity, by means of which they all gain confidence in Christ to call God their Father. The love of the Holy Trinity is far from being static, it is rather the Kingdom of love that offers itself to all. The eternal Son brings love into this world and presents Himself to the Father with His sacrifice and the community's, calling Him Father and thus stirring the love of the entire Trinity to move towards those souls who open up to Them in faith.

The commentary on the Holy Liturgy concludes with the description of the ritual of preparation of the holy Gifts for the Holy Communion and with an analysis on how important it is for the faithful to receive the Holy Eucharist in a state of worthiness, so that they may pre-taste and experience eternal life through the Holy Liturgy.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, p. 295.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 318: “Who is up in Heaven before the Father, as a High Priest, a Sacrifice and an Altar, there are our gifts, too, for He constantly lifts us up to the heights He ascended to as a man through His sacrifice.”

At this point, Fr. Stăniloae manages once more to centre his entire liturgical discourse on the importance of having a spiritual life, of pursuing a personal ascetic effort to attain dispassion, in order to have access to the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven and to be able to observe and partake in the pureness of the Saviour's state of sacrifice.

The faithful know that the Body of Christ that is presented to them is forever "broken in a mystical way" and given as sacrifice for the sins of the people. Through the Eucharist, Christ not only irradiates His crucified and resurrected state over men, but He actually gives them His own passion transfigured Body. And this Body He shares is alive and full of divine breath, capturing inside the sensibilities of His deified human soul that impregnate the pneuma of that who partakes of Him: "in His Body that is given to me, I can feel His mercy (...) which is His one of a kind love that is shared with me through His Body that is forever mystically broken for me."¹¹⁰

Christ's Body, which is always in a state of self-offering to the Father, is a life-giving Body, and by partaking of Him, the man is also able to enter the state of cleanness, delicacy and sacrificial predicament that Christ is in. The ascetic demand ensues here as well, for in order to be able to perceive this godly cleanness and goodness, one needs to be headed towards dispassion. , because¹¹¹.

Christ is replete in pure sensibilities, and His desire is to plant them in all who are His brothers by humanity, so that He might bring them all within Himself to the Father, and thus make His sacrifice efficient.

¹¹⁰ Idem, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă*, p. 344.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, p. 333: "Only a dull soul, brimming with the thickness of egoism, lacks that kind of sensitivity that allows him to perceive the cleanness and merciful delicacy of the King, Who gives Himself to the soul in a state of sacrifice".

5 The Liturgy after the Liturgy: our Sacrifice with Christ in a Life of Asceticism and Observance of the Holy Commandments

Fr. Stăniloae's entire theological work is a real assertion of the complex and unitary character of the Christian life. Man's participation in the life of communion of the Holy Trinity is the consummate gift that God gives to him, and He does that through the Saviour's sacrifice. In this sacrifice, the faithful may partake of the sacramental life of the Church, only to actuate it in their own personal ascetical lives in their pursuit to observe the commandments. This interweaving of Mysticism and Ascetics, this correlation between being and living in Christ is characteristic of the Orthodox spirituality.

“Through the Holy Sacraments, the Saviour enters the soul of every Christian and the ensuing connection with Him becomes effective through faith and the observance of His commandments, so that the force of His humanity may ripen into the force of our humanity. That is why our ascetic efforts represent our gradual death with Christ, the fulfilment of our whole selves with His sacrificial state as a sign of His sway, the death of the old man and an intentional extension of the baptism.”¹¹²

The mystical act (*μυστικῶς*) that occurred during the Mystery of the Holy Baptism, when the Christian died and was resurrected in imitation of Christ' death and resurrection, is then prolonged (*ἐνεργῶς*), through the observance of the holy commandments, in the daily life of the newly baptised, just like a perpetual crucifixion and resurrection with Christ.

The Saviour's sacrifice finds its ultimate finality and full efficiency in the sacramental life of the Church and in the ascetic life of each Christian. His ministry as High Priest is

¹¹² D. Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă. Ascetica și mistica*, p. 10.

fulfilled only when the personal sacrifice of each Christian is affixed to His own sacrifice.¹¹³

Christ's oblation, His state of sacrifice is eternal so that it may bear fruit in the lives of the faithful who, upon taking the Holy Mysteries, receive the entire power of Christ's sacrificial love so as to make it their own and then use it in their efforts to liberate themselves from the egotism of ephemeral pleasures and to anchor themselves in the state of self-giving to God and to one another.

Each man enters with Christ before the Father as a person, and the Saviour's sacrifice represents the wedding garment that the man must put on in order to enter the Holy of Holies that is above the Heavens.¹¹⁴ In uniting himself sacramentally, ethically and ascetically with Christ, the man opens up to his brethren through sacrificial love and thus enters a lifestyle that is characterised by the logic of self-sacrifice born within Christian selflessness.

“In reality, at the Holy Liturgy we partake of Christ in a state of sacrifice not only because we need to have him commiserate with us in our hardships, but also because we need to borrow from Him the power to suffer with Him for others.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, col. 1089B: „εἰ γὰρ μὴ ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν Χριστὸς, οὐκ ἂν ἡμεῖς παρεδέχθημεν εἰς ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας τῷ Θεῷ καὶ Πατρὶ. Ἐπειδὴ δὲ τετελειώται διὰ παθημάτων, κατόπιν ἴμεν εὐθὺς ἱεροπρεπὲς ἀνάθημα τῷ Θεῷ καὶ Πατρὶ, καὶ θυσίαν ὄντως πνευματικὴν καθ' ἑαυτοῦς ἀναφέροντες” - “We have no doubt that, were it not for Christ's death for us, we would have never been received by the Father as a sweet incensed oblation. Yet, once He has attained perfection through His passions, we follow closely behind Him, as consecrated gifts (ἱεροπρεπὲς ἀνάθημα) for God, the Father, and we offer ourselves as truly spiritual sacrifices.”

¹¹⁴ D. Stăniloae, *Legătura dintre Euharistie și iubirea creștină*, p. 19.

¹¹⁵ Idem, *Jertfa lui Hristos și spiritualizarea noastră prin împărtășirea de ea în Sfânta Liturghie*, p. 115: “And through the sacrifice we bring for others, we not only lay the gates of others' souls open for us, but we

In this manner, the altruistic compassion and love for all those who are in distress becomes, in the spiritual life of each Christian, both a qualifying criterion for admittance to the Mystery of Holy Eucharist, and a consequence of the Communion with the Body of Christ.

After thorough analysis and as a conclusion, one may safely state that Fr. Stăniloae was an initiator, an apostle, an excellent teacher, for he managed to synthesize in a creative manner, throughout his entire theological discourse, almost all the major themes of the Orthodox theology and spirituality.

One of the most impressive characterization of Fr. Stăniloae was made by Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală in order to honour his former professor and spiritual mentor: "An original thinker, creative, daring, with an amazing ability to delve exhaustively deep into all the possibilities of exploring a thought, a deed, or a manifestation of God's presence in the world, in the word, in the man, and in the universe - this is who Fr. Stăniloae was, is and will always be."¹¹⁶

Fr. Stăniloae's theological universe comprises everything, and the coherence of such theological thoroughness that he possessed sprang from the fact that it was entirely based on the spiritual and liturgical life of the Church. The Liturgy is the outpouring of life that gave birth to his theological expression. That is the reason why his view of the Eucharistic Synax is simultaneously undiluted, all-encompassing and complex: There is but one Liturgy, the Liturgy of consummate love within the Holy Trinity, of which all creation is called to partake. The human beings that are bound to this world through their bodies can do that by participating in the ritual of the Church, which is in essence a diastole, the way God's love reaches out into the world so as to draw all creation through His systole of love into

also meet Christ in them. (...) Only by opening up to one another through compassionate love are we able to meet Christ and be genuinely humanized".

¹¹⁶ A. Plămădeală, *În loc de introduce, p. XI.*

the life of intra-Trinitarian communion. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is in fact this very universal dynamism that draws the entire cosmos towards union with God. It unites men with God, and men with men, and thus it unveils the eschatological sense of the human existence:

The uniqueness of Fr. Stăniloae's liturgical discourse lies in its mystagogic finality, in his desire to initiate the Christians, just as the greatest Fathers of the Church had done before, in the mystery of God's presence in and within the people, with all the dogmatic, liturgical, and ascetical implications that it entails. Such profound theologizing is nothing more than his way of expressing himself, a happy refining of the living ecclesial tradition and of the outpouring of life that springs from the unseen though vivid presence of Christ in the Church through the grace of the Holy Spirit, a refining that he furthered through the filter of his profound personality that was abundant in spiritual delicacy and sensitivity, which made it possible that his entire deeply spiritual patristic discourse be received by his contemporaries as "not a word about redemption but a redeeming word, one that nourishes and enlightens the man."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Π. Νέλλα, „Είσαγωγή” στο Διμητρίου Στανιλόαε, *Για ένα Ορθόδοξο Οικουμενισμό, Ευχαριστία, Πίστη, Εκκλησία, Εκδόσεις*, (Άθως Πειραιεύς, 1976), p. 17.