

## Reflection for Holy Trinity Cathedral 2019

### Baptism, Eucharist and the Christian Community

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4: 4-6)

#### I. Introduction

These words of St. Paul draw our attention to the three interconnected realities that provide the basis for how we live and grow as Orthodox Christians. These realities are baptism, eucharist and the Christian community. While these realities may appear to be obvious, I would argue that what is obvious is often overlooked and/or misunderstood.

To a great extent it is thanks to the untiring work of Fathers Kiprian Kern, Nicholas Afanassiev and Alexander Schmemmann that there has been, over the course of the last 50 years, a restoration of the eucharist within Orthodox parishes here and abroad. One would think, given this restoration, that it would be accompanied by a clearer understanding of the sacraments, particularly baptism together with the local Christian community /the local parish. While some ground has been gained regarding the relationship between sacramental life and the local community, their disconnect unfortunately remains a reality that continues to undermine the Church’s ministry in proclaiming new life in the crucified and risen Christ.

#### II. Baptism

I cannot count the number of times I have received, either by phone message or email, requests to perform a baptism by those outside of the parish. What is strange – even sad - about these communications is that there was no desire to become part of our parish. I typically receive emails asking what preparations are needed to schedule a baptism. When I respond that becoming a member of the parish and regular attendance at the Liturgy are the prerequisites all communication ceases. This sort of response is by no means unusual. Invariably, when the well-intentioned inquirer is encouraged to become a regular communicant of the parish before a baptism could be scheduled, there is no ensuing response.

For some, baptism, specifically infant baptism, is an event where a child, having been given a Christian name, is properly dedicated to God so that the newly illumined may receive divine blessing and protection. That this dedication to God is to be accompanied by one’s entrance into and commitment to the ongoing life and work of the local community/parish is wanting. On the one hand, this pervasive

attitude continues in the Orthodox Church due in large part to poor and/or insufficient catechesis offered by the clergy. On the other hand baptism is often perceived as a cultural event that is associated with one's ethnic identity. Not surprisingly, from this perspective, baptism does not bind one to Christ's death and resurrection nor is it understood as entrance into the Church – the living body of Christ. Rather, baptism binds one to one's ethnic clan that stands ***parallel to and not within*** the local Christian community.

Each of us, by virtue of our baptism and reception of the Spirit through chrismation, are brought into the living body of Christ. It is our personal baptism binding us to the death and resurrection of Christ that is also our entrance and therefore our being received into the Church, that unique gathering of Christ's disciples who, in unity, assemble to concelebrate the new and everlasting covenant.

To enter and to be accepted by the local Eucharistic community presupposes that the newly illumined joins the community of fellow disciples as one who pledges to hear, receive, and to share the inexhaustible mystery of the Gospel beyond the parameters of the local community. Growth in Christ as a personal endeavor is not independent of the parish community. As the old Latin maxim says, *unus Christianus nullus Christianus – one Christian is no Christian*.

Participation in Christ's death and resurrection and entrance into the Christian community – the body of Christ/the *Una Sancta* – are the underpinnings and gifts associated with baptism. Because of our baptism we collectively stand around our one high priest Jesus Christ not as spectators but as concelebrants of the new and eternal covenant. Like the disciples who accompanied the crucified and risen Jesus to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33) we too are given the possibility to recognize him as Messiah who, in the breaking of the bread, reveals himself as the "one who offers and who is offered" for the life of the world and its salvation.

### **III. The Eucharist**

For those of my generation regular reception of the Eucharist was not the norm in Orthodox parishes here in North America and abroad. Infrequent communion reduced the Liturgy to a ritual usually celebrated in an incomprehensible language in which the reception of Holy Communion was often, at best, an annual or biannual obligation (Pascha and Christmas) that was preceded by a perfunctory confession.

Among the tragic consequences of this practice was the reduction of the Eucharist, prayer and Christian life to private endeavors. Manifestations of this reduction were especially apparent with regards to the parish community. Ultimately one's personal relationship with God required no need to be in communion with the ***other***. Consequently, whether one was physically present or physically absent from the Eucharistic gathering, the ***other*** was of no consequence. This *antithetical* attitude of self-segregating individuals who view life in Christ without the other have continues

to veil the Liturgy from being seen and experienced as the con-celebration of the new life in Christ - as an epiphany of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

If there is to be a healthy restoration of eucharistic life in the local parish two modes of existence – the personal and communal - need to form a symbiotic relationship. Neither mode can minimize or ignore the other. Neither mode can exist without the other. Father Dumitru Staniloae, an Orthodox theologian of the Church in Romania, picks up on this idea: “... one can say that the personal spiritual life does not develop in isolation from the Eucharistic community. In turn, the Eucharistic community does not stand outside the influence of the spiritual state of those persons who compose it....”<sup>1</sup>

Unless these interdependent modes of parish life influence and, if need be, correct each other through the ongoing process of conversion, repentance and ascetic struggle, the very content of Christian life expressed in and through the local community, becomes usurped by an alien spirit with a corresponding alien spirituality.

For some, receiving the Eucharist is independent of participating in the Liturgy of the Word. Consequently, gathering with the community for the reading and exposition of the Scriptures is not understood as a necessary component of the Liturgy. Communion with the proclaimed word while standing with those who are presumably my brother and sister have no connection with drawing near to the Lord’s Table.

For some, receiving the Eucharist is an entitlement. Being absent from the parish community for weeks or even months at a time coupled with not being aware to assist financially or in any other way the building up of the local parish presents no obstacle in drawing near to the chalice. Consequently, the local parish is often construed as a venue where one’s “spiritual needs” are met while any commitment to change one’s estranged relationship with the parish is rendered unimportant.

For some, the Paschal Sermon attributed to Saint John Chrysostom is an open invitation to the chalice that includes the non-Orthodox as well as those who are not baptized. Anyone familiar with this sermon is aware that Chrysostom is exhorting those Christians who have not fasted, including those who have not fasted until the eleventh hour, to draw near and to partake of the Paschal banquet.<sup>2</sup> Neither in this sermon nor in any of the authentic sermons of Chrysostom do we hear him inviting the unrepentant to the Savior’s table. Neither do we hear Chrysostom inviting Christians who have been absent for lengthy periods of time from the local

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<sup>1</sup> *The Liturgy of the Community and the Liturgy of the Heart From the View-Point of the Philokalia*, Community of the Servants of the Will of God, West Sussex, 1982, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> See Panayiotis Papageorgiou, *The Paschal Catechetical Homily Of St. John Chrysostom: A Rhetorical and Contextual Study*, Greek Orthodox Theological Review, vol. 43, nos. 1-4, pp. 93-104.

Eucharistic community or who consider the community superfluous to leading a Christian life.

It should be kept in mind that fasting for Chrysostom was not the most important act on the part of a Christian. In his sermon, *At the End of Fasting*, delivered in Antioch in 387, Chrysostom mentions the need to repent before approaching the chalice. In this sermon special emphasis is placed on being reconciled with one's enemy: "

But since we need to practice all the divine laws alike and more especially that which bids us to consider no one as an enemy, nor retain resentment long but to be reconciled immediately, allow us today to speak to you about this commandment. For as it is not to be imagined that the fornicator and the blasphemer can partake of the sacred table, so it is impossible that he who has an enemy and bears malice can enjoy the holy communion. And this with good reason.<sup>3</sup>

These words of Chrysostom resonate with the Paschal Verses; "Let us call *brothers* even those that hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection."

#### **IV. The Christian Community**

Baptism and reception of the eucharist have a communal context. The local parish is where personal salvation is worked out. It is both spiritual arena and spiritual paradise. It is where we, having heard the voice of our Good Shepherd, draw near and follow him. (John 10: 1-21) The local eucharistic community is the living body of Christ given to the world so that the other sheep outside of the fold may come to hear his voice and be joined to the "one flock and one shepherd." (vs.16) The communal celebration of the Lord's Supper is the very manifestation of unity – unity in Christ's death and resurrection, unity in one body, unity in one faith, unity in one shared life that may some day lead us to the ultimate expression of martyrdom. This is certainly how St. Ignatius of Antioch saw himself in relation to the local Church as he was making his way towards his martyrdom in Rome.

Let there be nothing in you that can divide you, but be united with the bishop and with those who preside over you as an example and lesson of immortality.... Do not attempt to make anything appear right for you by yourselves, but let there be in common one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope in love, in the joy which is without fault, that is Jesus Christ, than whom there is nothing better. Hasten all to come together as one temple of God, as to one altar, to one Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> See Frans van de Paverd, *St. John Chrysostom, The Homilies On The Statues*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 1991, p.231.

Christ, who came forth from the one Father who, being one with him, returned to him.<sup>4</sup>

By our baptism and participation in the eucharist we belong to the crucified and risen Christ. As members of his body, personally and corporately, we are commissioned to reveal and proclaim that the world is being overcome by God's inexhaustible love, by God's inexhaustible grace that comes with a price – the price of the cross- ascended by the one who gave himself up for the life of the world and its salvation. But this can only ring true if personally and corporately we exert ascetical effort so the grace of God's love can carry us above the standards of the world. The Church will not transcend the standards of the world so long as it continues to offer it what the venerable Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." I will end with his words:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.... Costly grace is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.... Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says; "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Magnesians VI, 2; VII, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> The Cost of Discipleship, SCM Press LTD, 1959, pp.36,37.