

Faith, Reason and the Eucharist: A Reflection

Much has been written and posted on line lately about Holy Communion and how it is to be distributed/received vis-à-vis the covid-19 crisis. In light of this, it is interesting that little attention has been paid to the relationship of faith and reason. The overriding reason for this omission is related to an understanding of the Eucharist and how it is distributed. As the body and blood of Christ, the Eucharist has repeatedly been held up as being immune from transmitting contagion. As a result, any discussion as to whether the Eucharist and its distribution is susceptible to receiving and transmitting contagion is perceived as suspicious, heretical and therefore a rebellion against the very core of Orthodox faith and life. Must the use of reason be discarded when it comes to matters of faith? Based on our history it is clear that deeply embedded in the tradition of the Orthodox Church there is the emphasis on the necessary co-existence and interdependence of faith and reason. Together they provide the basis for a living piety expressed in true worship. The following is an attempt to show the interrelationship of faith and reason and how their separation moves Christianity towards myth and superstition.

I.

“Faith is what gives fullness to our reasoning,” says St. Gregory of Nazianzus (Or. 29). However, for faith to fulfill our reasoning it must be living. It must be continuously put to the test by reason just as reason must recognize its own limitations when brought before the transcendent. Faith and reason maintain a necessary synergy that allows for the articulation of the encounter with the living God. Father Georges Florovsky put it this way:

Through faith, the human intellect is not condemned to remain forever deaf and blind to the one real truth in the Christian experience... On the contrary, we are postulating a Christian transfiguration of the intellect. Faith also illumines the intellect, while it also seeks after reason, *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeks understanding). And the fathers of the Church made the great effort to create a new intellectual system capable of providing a translation of the faith into the words of reason. It was a very difficult and bold task that is still not finished. (Body of the Living Christ)

Without reason, Scripture as an inexhaustible source of revelation cannot come alive and be understood. “*Scripture is not found in what is read, but in what is understood,*” said St. Hilary of Poitiers. Without reason there can be no creative formulation and articulation of dogma that is simultaneously acknowledged as an imperfect or incomplete expression of the infinite. Without reason the attributes of culture i.e. language, art, literature, science, philosophy, technology cannot be assessed and subsequently utilized for proclaiming Jesus Christ. Without reason, the faith of a searching soul has no means to cross examine what are mistakenly perceived to be states of ecstasy that inevitably feed the dark passions ruled by

pride and self love. Reason is the anchor that keeps the “passionate movements of the soul” in check (St. Gregory of Nyssa, On the Beatitudes, Hom. 2).

II.

Faith and reason share an eternal marriage. As reason accompanies faith into the realm of the unknown, it does not cease to probe, analyze and assess the never-ending discoveries of faith. Likewise, giving fullness to our reasoning, faith provides knowledge that transcends but does not supersede reasoning. Pseudo-Dionysius expresses the paradoxical complexity of the coexistence of faith and reason.

God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name and many other things. On the other hand he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him. He is not one of things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything. (The Divine Names, VII, 3, 872)

Faith is based on knowledge. Faith is not an emotional, reckless and therefore thoughtless move towards the unknown and infinite. Even the commonly referred to “leap of faith” is an acknowledgement that reason has led to new vistas of knowing that exceed the limits of its own logic. These new vistas are encountered and penetrated by faith. Consequently, faith is not wishful thinking. It affirms that there is more to knowing and experiencing than what reason has apprehended relative to God and his creation.

Faith begins in time and space as it extends into the eternal and infinite. Our recitation/singing of the Creed – The Symbol of Faith – at the Divine Liturgy affirms that we are personally and communally as the Church joined to the *Magnalia Dei*. We begin with the creation of “all things visible and invisible” and end with the eschaton i.e. “the life of the world to come.”

III.

In one of his letters to Bishop Amphilochius of Iconium, St. Basil the Great writes that our relationship with God is based on *faith and knowledge* that lead to *worship*. “We *believe* in him who is *known*, and we *worship* him who is believed in” (Letter 234). These words are helpful when it comes to how we approach worship in general and the Eucharist in particular. Belief, knowledge/reason and worship are symbiotic. They are distinct but not separated from each other. They are interdependent and therefore each contributes to the growth and integrity of the other.

Our worship is inextricably bound to the creation. Therefore how we understand and commune with the creation in our worship is based on faith and reason. The bread and wine used in the Liturgy are of the material creation. At no time in the Liturgy do they lose their physical and created properties. To borrow from the Liturgy of St. Basil, the *antitypes* i.e. the bread and wine that we offer are *shown*, by the Holy Spirit, to be the body and blood of Christ. What is seen and tasted is bread and wine. What is consumed is a foretaste of God's heavenly banquet. St. John Chrysostom describes the relationship between what an object is through sight and what it is believed to be by faith as a mystery; "... mystery is not when we believe what we see, but when we see one thing and believe another" (Homily VII, 1Corinthians). Within the context of his sermon, Chrysostom is basically saying that mystery is seeing something while believing it to be something else. Regarding the Eucharist, we can say that we see bread and wine but believe that it is the *mysterion* of the body and blood of Christ.

IV.

During the covid-19 crisis, many maintain that because the Eucharist is "the medicine of immortality" (St. Ignatius of Antioch, Ephesians, XX) and therefore "unto the healing of soul and body" it is not susceptible to contagion. To arrive at this conclusion points to separating the material components of the Eucharist – bread and wine – from the rest of creation. The result of this separation is a faith and worship that are inconsistent with the Church's theology and its relationship to reason. To spiritualize the Eucharist – to deny its physical qualities is to promote either a type of docetism in which what is seen and handled is an illusion, or a type of monophysitism in which the created and physical properties of bread and wine are lost by being absorbed into the divine nature. Both distortions/heresies mistakenly remove the bread and wine from possibly becoming receptacles and transmitters of a contagion as virulent as covid-19.

Orthodox Christianity espouses the gifts of faith and reason. During this time of crisis we need to remember that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive. Both are necessary for promoting a healthy, stable and transformative message of the Gospel. Both are necessary for properly serving and caring for the life of the world and its salvation.

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