

## HEAVEN AND EARTH IN BYZANTINE LITURGY

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It seems to be an unwritten rule that every presentation on the Byzantine liturgy must begin with the retelling of the story of the conversion of the Slavs to Byzantine Christianity. The story is that Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent out a delegation to travel throughout the world in order to inquire into the relative merits of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the course of their itinerant investigations, the travelers came upon the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Their impression, as recorded in the letter they sent back to Vladimir, is easily the most frequently quoted commentary on the Byzantine Liturgy: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. We cannot describe it to you; we only know that God dwells there among human beings, and their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty."<sup>1</sup> Aside from capturing the sense of spiritual and esthetic exaltation that is often experienced by newcomers to the Byzantine liturgy, the remarks of Prince Vladimir's envoys are also significant, it seems to me, in that they are so often used to embellish a fundamental misunderstanding of Byzantine liturgy, according to which the utterance is taken to mean, "We felt we were no longer on earth, but in heaven." What the inquirers actually said was, "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth." The difference is ostensibly minor but actually quite significant: The original remark is a classic expression of the notion of the mutual transparency between earth and heaven the authentic and pervasive understanding of Byzantine liturgy. The misinterpretation (and often misquotation) belies a view of Byzantine liturgy as simply staged in heaven, away from earth. The expression "heavenly liturgy," so often applied to Byzantine liturgy— and with good reason, as we shall see— can often be used and understood in a way that masks the reality that the "heavenly liturgy" motif in the Byzantine tradition is a feature that dramatizes the christological synergy of heaven and earth, rather than simply suggest the magical replacement of earth by heaven.

### Earth and Heaven

If I have taken the risk of beginning my essay on the somewhat sour note of pointing to misinterpretations, it is because the eschatological thrust of Byzantine worship is undeniably strong and vigorous, while its misconstrual can be disastrous for a proper appreciation of Byzantine liturgy and spirituality. Moreover, the tendency to such misconstrual is perhaps aggravated by the current *Zeitgeist* in which singing with angels is a very welcome motif— all the more so if it can be distanced from the archaic notion that such singing is enabled by the violent death of a Jewish carpenter who is the unique mediator between heaven and earth. Or, again, the invitation to indulge in an otherworldly reality, "to leave

aside all earthly cares" (as we sing in the Byzantine liturgy), may easily lead some to overlook the underlying affirmation that the earthly reality has no other meaning or worth than that which it has under the sovereignty of God and in relation to the sacrificial self-offering of Christ.

Perhaps it is ultimately an intrinsic feature of humanity's fallen religiosity that it seeks to join God in heaven without having God impose himself on earth. This point, along with some rather trenchant remarks about the Byzantine liturgy, is made by the great Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. In his *Das Hertz der Welt*, a wonderful and passionate meditation on the sacred heart of Jesus, Balthasar dramatizes the pathos of the complex enmity between God and humanity by characterizing God as "the Intruder" who tries to seduce humanity with his love, and against whose seductions a suspicious humanity tries to steel itself: "Watch out: he is a good dissembler. He begins with a small love, a small flame, and before you realize it he has gotten total hold of you and you are caught. If you let yourself be caught you are lost, for heavenwards there are no limits."<sup>2</sup> An ironic voice suggests that the best weapon against God's determined love is a clear-cut eschatology:

Take him at his word and things will be easiest: "My kingdom is not of this world." Here you have the key. His kingdom is not of this world, is not this world. How sublime! How heavenly! He possesses a higher kingdom. Praise him, boost him up into this higher kingdom! Let him have his kingdom and then he'll have to let us have ours.<sup>3</sup>

Balthasar then elaborates on how this strategy can be successfully executed in the most immaculately pious modes, among which there is the Byzantine liturgy:

You can also hide him behind the iconostasis. Back there, unseen by the profane crowd, the bearded priests perform their duties, and only at a distance can one hear the echoes of chants and bells jingling. The mystery is thrice holy, an image and reenactment of the heavenly divine liturgy, and any direct contact with it would constitute a profanation.<sup>4</sup>

Balthasar's remarks serve well to situate the problematic on which I would like to reflect here on some aspects of the Byzantine liturgy. Notwithstanding the acerbity of Balthasar's remarks (which I have unfairly quoted out of context), the great theologian makes the perennially valid point that an eschatological orientation can be used to evade as much as to encounter God. The Byzantine liturgy, with all its solemnity and air of transcendence, may well be perceived as putting God "at a distance" and thwarting "direct contact." It is crucial therefore to get past the rather giddy but ultimately ambivalent fascination with the seemingly "otherworldly" aspects of the Byzantine liturgy. The motif of the "heavenly liturgy" that is so strongly dramatized and articulated in Byzantine liturgy has to be seen in its complete and integral context, in mutual relationship to other constitutive motifs.

By way of sketching some of the structural features of these mutual relations, I would like to interpret the "heavenly liturgy" motif in relation variously to the Byzantine conception of liturgical space, redemption in Christ, liturgical time, human repentance, and the work of the Spirit. I hope to provide some substance to my underlying claim that the Byzantine liturgy is not so much about a temporary excursion to an otherworldly reality as it is about the truth that here and now in Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God has drawn near with power.

### Liturgical Space

As can be gleaned from Balthasar's remarks, the Byzantine organization of liturgical space is dominated by the presence of the iconostasis, a wall of icons situated between the nave and the altar. Balthasar's remarks are indicative of the tendency among those outside the Byzantine tradition to interpret the

iconostasis as something that *separates* the nave from the altar though this is sometimes taken as another indication of a rarified atmosphere of transcendence.

Insofar as both the Byzantine liturgical texts and the mystagogical tradition relate altar to nave as heaven to earth, we are left with the notion that the Byzantine liturgy is an extended voyeuristic peek at heaven. From within the Byzantine tradition, however, and as is indicated by the internal dynamism of the liturgy itself, the iconostasis is rather the bridge that unites altar and nave, even while distinguishing them. Dominated by the icon of Christ himself, who is joined by the *Theotokos*, John the Baptist, and the saints, the iconostasis situates the boundary between heaven and earth in the event of the Incarnation. What the iconostasis actually and dramatically signifies is that the union of heaven and earth is not merely the absorption of one by the other, nor a *tertium quid*, but a "Passover" in Christ. The faithful face the iconostasis not as if it were a wall that blocks them from the altar, but as a sign that their Passover into heaven is accomplished in and through Jesus Christ. Indeed, perhaps, the real significance of the iconostasis and the relation that it delineates between the altar and nave can be intimated by reference to the Augustinian notion of the *totus Christus*. The whole church is the *totus Christus*; the distinction between the head and the body, the nave and the altar, is pervasively dialogical.<sup>5</sup> But the distinction remains, not however as a static boundary, but precisely as a christological and soteriological event, an event that is appropriated as our own transformative assimilation to the Incarnate Son of God.

#### Dynamic Relationship

The dynamic character of this dialogical relation between nave and altar is experientially evident in the fact that, within the dramatic movement of the Byzantine liturgy, the iconostasis repeatedly effects the *entrance* into the altar. Commenting on this motif of "entrance," the Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann speaks of "the *entering*, dynamic character of this ceremony, the eucharist as *movement*."<sup>6</sup> He adds:

The idea of *entrance* has a truly decisive significance for the understanding of the eucharist.... The meaning of the eucharist is contained in the *entry* of the Church into the kingdom of God; that in a sense the eucharist is entirely *entrance*; and that the lifting up, the *anaphora*, is related not only to the holy gifts... but to the Church herself, to the very assembly. For ... the eucharist is the *sacrament of the kingdom*, accomplished by the ascent and entry of the Church into the heavenly sanctuary.<sup>7</sup>

Schmemmann's words are justified by the fact that the motif of entrance, spatially represented by the iconostasis, is crucial for the whole dramatic form of the Byzantine liturgy. The two main sections of the liturgy, corresponding to what is customarily referred to in the West as the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist, are preceded respectively by the so-called "Little Entrance," a procession with the Gospel book which culminates in a solemn entrance into the altar, and the "Great Entrance," a similar procession with the gifts. Thus, the structural overarching movement of the liturgy takes the form of an entrance which is both enabled and represented by the presence of the iconostasis. This dynamic character comes into even stronger relief when we consider that the historical origins of the present-day processions, which circulate from the altar around the church and back to the altar, were processions that began from one church (or sometimes even a public square) and continued through the streets of the city, culminating in an entrance into the church where the eucharist was to be celebrated. Thus, the original liturgical movement of entrance encompassed the whole *polis*, a fact that

Schememann takes as illustrative of "that fundamental, original and immutable *correlation* of the Church and the world."<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we can evoke the importance of the iconostasis, as well as a subtle distinction in western and eastern liturgical piety, by seeing it as occupying a somewhat analogous role to the western practice of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The latter practice is only intelligible in light of the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic species. Similarly, the significance of the iconostasis cannot be grasped apart from reference to the altar as the heavenly throne of the Lords table. The intentionality of the assembly is in both cases directed not to an objectified presence but to the very movement of entering into the divine realm. In the iconostasis what is in view is the paschal character of the Incarnation as the entrance of all humanity into the bosom of the Father. The Letter to the Hebrews comes to mind here: "Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into *heaven itself*, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb 9:24).<sup>9</sup> The iconostasis embodies the reality that because of Christ's entrance, because Christ has become our entrance, we too can enter before the Father. At the end of the Little Entrance with the Gospel book, the celebrant prays that "with our entrance there may be an entrance of holy angels serving with us and glorifying thy goodness," and the congregation chants the "Trisagion" hymn, in evocation of the angelic acclamation of "holy, holy, holy."<sup>10</sup> The medieval Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas comments that it is shown thereby "that angels and men form one Church, a single choir, because of the coming of Christ who was both of heaven and earth."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the configuration of liturgical space in the Byzantine tradition must be interpreted christologically. Both the church itself and the movement of the liturgy represent entrance into the Kingdom of God as taking place within the advent and ascent of Christ.

#### **Redemption in Christ**

Turning now to a fuller view of the motif of the heavenly liturgy in relation to the redemption in Christ, we note that the theme of the heavenly liturgy and the union of heaven and earth is first and foremost a christological theme. The theme has a direct relation to the development of christological doctrine. This is clearly seen in the work of St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662). Maximus, who is called "Confessor" because his tongue was severed for his defense of the doctrine of the two wills of Christ, in many ways represents the synthesis and apex of patristic christological teaching. For Maximus, the unity-within-distinction in the person of Christ represents the ontological "code," as it were, of all reality. In its origins and destiny, reality is theandric; having participation in the *Logos* as its principle and goal, it is destined to be brought into unity through the priestly mediatorial agency of humanity. This process is fulfilled through the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word, who has brought into mutual harmony and all-embracing unity the various levels of creaturely reality: "He binds about himself...paradise and the inhabited world, heaven and earth, things sensible and things intelligible. Thus he divinely recapitulates the universe in himself."<sup>12</sup> If the liturgy is celebrated by a mixed choir of humans and angels, that is because Christ, "by passing with his soul and body, that is, with the whole of our nature, through all the divine and intelligible ranks of heaven [has] united the sensible and the intelligible and showed the convergence of the whole creation."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the Chalcedonian formula becomes for Maximus a hermeneutical key for interpreting the very structure of the church considered in terms of a kind of "communication of idioms" between the nave and the altar. Within such a perspective, the church and the liturgy do not so much represent a departure from earthly reality into the

heavenly but rather bring to actualization the christological transfiguration that encompasses the whole cosmos:

The holy church of God presents itself as an image and likeness of the entire cosmos, which encompasses visible and invisible beings, inasmuch as the church displays the same unity and variety as the universe. For though as a structure it is a single building, the differentiation within its form gives it variety, inasmuch as it is divided into a section reserved for the priest and officiating ministers (this we call the altar) and another to which the entire believing people has access (this we call the nave). Yet it is one in its reality, not being divided by having parts which are diverse from each other; rather, by subsuming these parts into its own unity, it rescues them from the separateness proper to ... states and callings and shows that each is one with the other because each signifies to the other that which it is in itself: namely, that the nave is an altar in potency, because it has been dedicated to the goal of the consecration of the mystery, and conversely that the altar is also a nave because the nave is the point of departure for the exercise of its own consecration of the mystery. It is because of both that the church is the one reality which it is.<sup>14</sup>

This christological principle of the "communication of idioms," applied here to the interpretation of liturgical space, is also a pervasive feature of Byzantine liturgical poetry, in which the heavenly liturgy motif is employed typically to elaborate on the mysteries of the life of Christ. The *kondakion* or appointed hymn for the Feast of the Nativity, clearly presents the Incarnation as the event that inaugurated the heavenly liturgy upon earth: "Today the Virgin gives birth to the transcendent in essence, and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable one. Angels and shepherds sing his glory; for to us is born a child, who is God from all eternity." Similarly, the *kondakion* of the last of the specifically christological feasts of the liturgical year, the Feast of the Ascension, praises Christ for having "completed joining the things of earth with the things of heaven."

#### Cross and Kingdom

Contrary to a common misperception, the Byzantine tradition— at least as exemplified by the Byzantine liturgy— does not ascribe this joining of earth and heaven exclusively to the Incarnation understood as an isolated event that is abstracted from Christ's sacrificial death.<sup>15</sup> In the Byzantine liturgy, the theme of Christ's sacrifice is quite prominent, and as Alexander Schmemmann points out, it is directly linked to the theme of the heavenly liturgy through the motif of Christ's royalty, which is considered to be established on earth through his sacrificial death.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the perception of the liturgy as a celebration and actualization of Christ's sacrifice is made manifest very early on in the rite, beginning with the rite of *prothesis* or preparation of the gifts. The priests cutting up of the bread that will be offered is represented as a reenactment of the immolation of Christ on the Cross and intermingled with verses from the Suffering Servant song of Isaiah: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a spotless lamb before his shearer, he opened not his mouth." The celebrant carves out a Cross on the bread and says, "Sacrificed is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, for the life of the world and its salvation." Then, quite without any recognition of cognitive dissonance, the priest immediately follows this dramatization of Christ's immolation by censing the bread and uttering a prayer that triumphantly sounds the royal theme: "The Lord has reigned; he has clothed himself with might and girded himself." This association of the royal theme with Christ's immolation on the Cross has to be kept in mind when we interpret the appearance of the heavenly liturgy motif at the moment of the great entrance, the procession with the gifts. This procession is accompanied by the so-called "cherubic hymn": "We who mystically represent the cherubim and sing to the life-giving Trinity the thrice-holy hymn, let us now lay aside all earthly care: that we may receive the King of all, who comes invisibly upborne by angelic hosts." The king who is welcomed here— given the context of the prayers mentioned

above— is the king who has clothed himself with might by enduring death on the Cross, and who *in this way* has established his reign and ushered us into the heavenly places.

This simultaneity of Cross and kingdom, of sacrifice and exaltation, is strikingly represented by a juxtaposition of two distinct emphases related to the so-called "Great Entrance," which are present in both the liturgical texts themselves and the mystagogical tradition. On the one hand, there is the motif of the ascent of the church to the divine throne: "we who mystically represent the cherubim "; for Maximus, the entrance of the gifts into the altar ushers in the "new age" of the kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, there is a strand of representational allegory in the liturgical texts to reinforce the point that what is being actualized is the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Thus, upon placing the holy gifts on the altar, the priests prayers recall "the noble Joseph, when he had taken down your spotless body from the tree and wrapped it in fine linen and spices, and placed it sorrowingly in a new tomb." Germanus of Constantinople (ca. 634-ca. 733), having just spoken of the procession of the gifts as the ascension of the church into heaven with the angels, adds: "The altar is an image of the holy tomb and the divine table is the sepulchre on which, of course, the undefiled and all-holy body was placed."<sup>18</sup> The distinctly Byzantine liturgical genius lies precisely in dramatizing the simultaneity of these two emphases, a simultaneity which it understands not merely as a rhetorical artifice but as a reality that is ontologically founded on the personal unity of the God-Man. The celebrant then utters this prayer: "In the grave with the body, but in Hades with the soul, in Paradise with the thief, as God, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, you were filling all things, O Christ, being yourself uncircumscribed." Finally, we have the climactic reference to Christ's tomb as a royal throne, again underlining the inner unity between Christ's death and resurrection: "As giving life, as more splendid than Paradise, and more radiant than any royal chamber, O Christ, is shown forth thy tomb, the fountain of our resurrection."

#### Liturgical Time

The fact that the simultaneous looking back at the historical details of the death of Christ and the looking upward in an eschatological gaze occurs most explicitly in the context of representing the sacrifice of Christ should alert us to the fact that this context is crucial for interpreting the phenomenon of liturgical time. From the perspective of the heavenly liturgy motif, we have here an assimilation of earth to heaven in a temporal key, as the assimilation of time to eternity. For the Byzantine liturgy, the saving events of Christ are always celebrated as happening "today"; and the "today" of the liturgy is explicated as meaning "now and ever and unto ages of ages." The prayer of the *anaphora* presents a highly concentrated synopsis of salvation, from creation to eschatological fulfillment, and it reads the whole history which extends to eternity as already fulfilled and now liturgically realized in the remembrance of Jesus sacrificial self-offering. The result is that the fulfillment of the Kingdom, which is explicitly qualified as the *future* Kingdom, is also paradoxically spoken of as a past event, in the same way as creation is something that already happened: "You it was who brought us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen away, you raised us up again, and you did not cease to do all things until you had brought us back to heaven and endowed us with your future kingdom." After the faithful join in the triumphal angelic hymn, chanting, "Holy, Holy, Holy," before the divine throne, the priest pronounces the words of consecration. Immediately afterwards, by way of explicating the sacramental remembrance, the priest once again "remembers" the past, present, and future of salvation as an event already realized in the act of Jesus now being re-presented: "Remembering, therefore, this saving

commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, and the second and glorious coming again, we offer to you, O Lord, your own from your own, in behalf of all and for all." The future consummation of the kingdom is itself remembered within the remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection. There is nothing beyond the paschal mystery of Christ— not temporally, not logically, not ontologically. Through the Passover of his death and resurrection, Christ has entered once and for all into the heavenly realm, so that henceforth all time, including future time, can be "remembered" through a double reference to the past event, by which this entrance was consummated, and to the present reality of the person of Christ who reigns eternally at the right hand of the Father.

### Repentance

From the human side, the christological simultaneity of Cross and exaltation is reflected by a stance that is also simultaneously one of exaltation and repentance. The note of repentance is repeatedly sounded by the characteristic refrain of all Byzantine petition, which is not "Lord, hear our prayer," but simply, "Lord, have mercy." If one looks closely, one finds a general tendency to complement every evocation of ascent with a corresponding appeal to humility, often bodily enacted by the gesture of a deep bow. We have already made much of the fact that the iconostasis dramatically represents the entrance of the church into the Kingdom of God. But it is of the utmost significance that the entrance of the priest himself through the iconostasis is actually a penitential rite, a confession of sin and unworthiness. The liturgical texts clearly mean to indicate that the ascent of the earthly church into the heavenly Kingdom is absolutely contingent upon divine forgiveness and compassion: it is the love of the Cross that makes it possible. So the priest, before his entrance through the iconostasis implores:

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us. For laying aside all defense, we sinners offer to you, as Master, this supplication, have mercy upon us. For of your own free will, you were pleased to ascend the cross in the flesh, that you may deliver from bondage to the enemy those whom you have fashioned.

The same dialectic is manifest in the prayer of the *Trisagion*, when the assembly chants the thrice-holy song of the angels, now interpreted as a Trinitarian acclamation: "Holy God, Holy Mighty one, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us." The accompanying prayer of the priest dramatically conflates the theme of singing with the angels with that of human unworthiness and dependence on divine mercy:

Holy God, you dwell among your saints. You are praised by the Seraphim with the thrice-holy hymn and glorified by the Cherubim, and worshipped by all the heavenly powers.... You give wisdom and understanding to the supplicant and do not overlook the sinner but have established repentance as the way of salvation. You have enabled us, Your lowly and unworthy servants, to stand at this hour before the glory of your holy altar and to offer you due worship and praise. Master, accept the thrice holy hymn also from the lips of us sinners.

As is evident from this prayer, the Byzantine liturgy typically underscores not merely the collective presence of human beings and angels in liturgical worship, but— a matter regularly overlooked— it also tends to emphasize explicitly the inherent incongruity of such association. Indeed, it is true that it is absolutely incommensurate for even the angels to stand in the presence of God's majesty, but this is pointed out only to stress further the more shocking irregularity of sinful human beings to be associated in the same company: "No one who is bound to the desires of the flesh is worthy to approach or minister to you, O King of glory, for to serve you is a great and terrible thing even for the heavenly powers." The incongruity of the juxtaposition of sinful human beings and the angelic host is again a central theme in the *anaphora* prayers said by the priest and leading to the "Holy, Holy, Holy," the song

of the angels. Here the singing with the angels is contextualized by the whole christological narrative of redemption:

When we had fallen away, you raised us up again and you did not cease to do all things until you had brought us back to heaven and granted us the kingdom which is to come....And we give thanks to you also for this ministry which you are pleased to receive at our hands, even though there stand before you thousands of angels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring aloft, borne on their pinions, singing the triumphal hymn, shouting, proclaiming, and saying, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth.

The narrative contextualization here dramatizes the fact that our singing with the angels is simply the culmination of a long story of Fall and Redemption. Indeed we can say that because of this story it is not quite the same song for us as it is for the angels. For them it is simply an adoration of Gods glory; for us it is an adoration of Gods glory as manifest especially in our salvation and redemption from sin and death. To borrow a patristic exegetical motif, while we appear to sing the same song as the angels, we sing it as the one lost sheep who rejoins the choir of the ninety-nine who did not stray, being carried on the shoulder of the shepherd who gave his life for the sheep.

The characteristic tendency of the Byzantine liturgy to be startled by the exaltation of sinful humanity represents nothing less than a dramatized liturgical theology of grace. The focus of such a theology of grace is neither human incapacity nor human capacity but rather, once again, the transformation and ascent of the human, despite its sinfulness, to the divine. The emphasis on transformation is clearly related both to the pervasive motif of "entrance" in the liturgy as well as the general importance of the theme of transfiguration in Byzantine spirituality and iconography. Central to all these emphases is the tendency to represent the glory of God in light of human conversion. A significant example of this is the prayer invoking divine illumination that precedes the reading of the Gospel:

Illumine our hearts, O Master who loves mankind, with the pure light of your divine knowledge and open the eyes of our mind that we may understand the message of your gospel. Impress within us also reverence for your blessed commandments, so that trampling down all carnal desires, we may pursue a spiritual life, both thinking and doing all that is pleasing to you. For you are the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and to you we ascribe glory, together with your Father who is without beginning and your all-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit, now and always and forever and ever, Amen.

Commenting on this prayer, Schmemmann explicates the theology of grace that is implicit here and elsewhere throughout the Byzantine liturgy: "Like the consecration of the gifts, *understanding* and *acceptance* of the word depend not on us, not only on our desire, but above all on the sacramental transformation of the eyes of our mind, on the coming to us of the Holy Spirit."<sup>19</sup>

### **The Holy Spirit in the Liturgy**

While the prayer just quoted does not, in fact, explicitly mention the Holy Spirit as the agent of illumination, Schmemmann's interpretation is consistent with the general trend of the Byzantine liturgy to invoke the Holy Spirit as the initiator and facilitator of liturgical transformation. This tendency is notoriously associated with east-west controversy over whether it is the words of institution or the invocation of the Holy Spirit that consummate the transformation of the gifts. Infelicitous as the whole controversy was and is, it does highlight the distinct emphases of eastern and western liturgical aesthetics. To hazard an inevitably exaggerated generalization, the west tends to be concerned with the objective reality of *what* is happening while the east is disposed to a more dramatic representation of the *process*, the movement from here to there.<sup>20</sup> In the latter, the Holy Spirit is represented as the initiator and

facilitator of this movement toward Christ. There is therefore an unbreakable correlation between the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The liturgy begins with the Prayer to the Holy Spirit; it is the Holy Spirit who transforms the gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ; and communion in Christ entails the reception of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, immediately after communion, the faithful chant: "We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit, we have found the true faith, worshipping the undivided Trinity, who has saved us." Within this correlation the Holy Spirit is always invoked as the dynamic *milieu* in which Christ becomes present and in which humanity becomes united with Christ. In terms of the dialectic between human unworthiness and exaltation, the Spirit is the one who assimilates the human sinner to the self-offering of Christ, which in turn effects our entrance into the heavenly realm. This dynamic is especially evident in the prayers of the priest which invoke the Holy Spirit for the sake of his assimilation to the high priesthood of Christ:

Therefore I implore you who alone are good and are ready to listen: Look down upon me, your sinful and unworthy servant, and cleanse my heart and my soul from an evil conscience. By the power of the Holy Spirit enable me, who has been granted the grace of the priesthood, to stand before your holy table and celebrate the mystery of your holy and pure body and precious blood.... For you yourself are the one who offers and is offered, who receives and is distributed, O Christ our God.

The reference to Christ as the one who both offers and is offered once again brings into view the christological dialectic that underlies the whole Byzantine liturgy, here complemented by reference to the Holy Spirit as the one who assimilates us to this christological dialectic.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to portray the Byzantine liturgy— in particular, its central "heavenly liturgy" motif— as a celebration not of the departure from earth to heaven, nor of a far-look at a distant heaven, but as the actualization of the mutual transparency between heaven and earth and the entrance of earth into heaven through Christ. The Byzantine liturgy is always concerned to proclaim that by the power of the Holy Spirit space, time, and even human sinfulness are transformed and integrated into the union of earth and heaven accomplished by the unsurpassable self-offering of Christ. I have made the point that the air of transcendence that pervades the Byzantine liturgy is not something that abstracts from earthly reality and its historical redemption through Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection, but rather verifies the very reality that Balthasar's ironic *persona* mentioned earlier warns against: "He begins with a small love, a small flame, and before you realize it he has gotten total hold of you and you are caught. If you let yourself be caught, you are lost, for heavenwards there are no limits." Ultimately the Byzantine liturgy is about the startling good news that once we were lost on earth and in bondage to sin and death, but now earth itself is lost in heaven, in thrall to the love and beauty of the triune God.

## Notes

1 *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. Laurentian Text (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 110-111.

2 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979), 117

3 *Ibid.*, 120.

4 *Ibid.*, 129.

5 The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann speaks of the "dialogic structure" of the Byzantine Church: "Here it is a mutual correlation between the altar and the sanctuary, on the one hand, and the ark or nave the place of the assembly on the other. The nave is directed toward the altar, in which we find its end and purpose; but the altar necessarily entails the nave and exists only in relation to it" (*The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1987], 20). Schmemmann's remarks bear a strong resemblance to those of Maximus the Confessor quoted later in this essay (see n. 12). Schmemmann further

remarks that the Byzantine liturgy "is entirely, from beginning to end, constructed on the principle of correlationthe mutual dependence of the celebrant of the service and the people. One may even more precisely define this bond as a *co-serving* or *concelebration*" (Ibid., 14; italics in original).

6 Ibid., 52-53; italics in original.

7 Ibid., 50.

8 Ibid., 53. Schmemmann adds: "If assembling as the Church presupposes separation from the world ... this exodus from the world is accomplished *in the name of the world*, for the sake of its salvation....We are a part of it, and only by us and through us does it ascend to its Creator, Savior, and Lord, to its goal and fulfillment." For a thorough study of the "stational" or processional character of Byzantine liturgy, see John Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship. The Origins, Development, and Meaning of Stational Liturgy*. *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 229 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987).

9 All Bible quotations adapted from The New American Bible (1970), occasionally modified by the author with reference to the Greek text.

10 All quotations from the Byzantine liturgy are based on the English translation in *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1985), occasionally modified by the author with reference to the Greek text.

11 Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* 20. J.M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty, trans. (London: SPCK, 1960), 59.

12 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 41; PG 91, 1312A; Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

13 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 41; PG 91, 1309C; Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 159-160.

14 Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogy*; PG 91, 668D-669A; quoted in Hans-Joachim Schulz, *The Byzantine Liturgy: Symbolic Structure and Faith Expression* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1986), 44-45 (slightly altered translation).

15 St. Athanasius, for example, one of those who tends to be interpreted along such lines, states clearly that the Incarnation of the Word has as its goal Christ's self-offering of his humanity as a sacrifice, *thusia*, to the Father. Athanasius speaks of the advent of Christ as one integral event which establishes Gods reign from heaven to Hades: "For the Word extended himself everywhere, above and below and in the depth and in the breadth: above, in creation; below, in the incarnation; in the depth, in hell; in breadth, in the world. Everything is filled with the knowledge of God" (*De Incarnatione* 16).

16 Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, 119-120.

17 Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia*, 16.

18 Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, 37, translation from Paul Meyendorff, *St. Germanus of Constantinople: On the Divine Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1984), 87.

19 Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, 76 (emphases in original).

20 See Raniero Canatalemessa, *The Eucharist. Our Sanctification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983), 71.