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"The Sacrament of the Word"

Chapter 4 of *The Eucharist* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, NY, 1987), pp. 65-80.

> ***"Illumine our hearts, O Master who lovest mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge. Open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings. Implant also in us the fear of Thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto Thee..."***
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> *PRAYER BEFORE THE GOSPEL*

1

ACCORDING TO THE UNANIMOUS TESTIMONY OF ALL EARLY EVIDENCE, the reading of holy scripture from the very beginning constituted an inseparable part of the "assembly as the Church" and, specifically, the eucharistic gathering. In one of the first descriptions of the eucharist that we have, we read: "on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in the cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand together and offer prayers... and when we have finished the

prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water..."[1] Here the link between the reading of scripture and the homily, on the one hand, and the offering of the eucharistic gifts, on the other, is obvious. And we find further witness to this in the contemporary order of the eucharist, in which there is an inseparable link between the so-called liturgy of the catechumens, dedicated primar-

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[1] Justin Martyr, *First Apology,* 67:3-5, tr. C.C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers,* Library of Christian Classics 1 (New York, 1970) 287).

ily to the word of God, and the liturgy of the faithful, consisting of the offering, consecration and distribution of the holy gifts.

Meanwhile, our official textbooks, our theological explanations and definitions of the eucharist practically ignore this unanimous testimony. In the life and practice of the Church the eucharist consists of two inseparably linked parts. But in theological reflection it is reduced to only one— the second— part, i.e., to what is accomplished over the bread and wine, as if this second part were self-contained and unrelated, whether spiritually or theologically, to the first.

This "reduction" is explained, of course, by the influence on our school theology of western ideas, in which *word* and *sacrament* long ago lost touch with each other and became subjects of independent study and definition. However, this rift constitutes one of the chief deficiencies in the western doctrine on the sacraments. After being adopted de facto by our school systems, it sooner or later led to an erroneous, one-sided and distorted understanding both of *word— i.e.,* holy scripture and its place in the life of the Church— and *sacrament.* I daresay that the gradual "decomposition" of scripture, its dissolution in more and more specialized and negative criticism, is a result of its alienation from the eucharist— and practically from the Church herself— as an experience of a spiritual reality. And in its own turn, this same alienation deprived the sacrament of its evangelical content, converting it into a self-contained and self-sufficient "means of sanctification. The scriptures and the Church are reduced here to the category of two formal *authorities,* two "sources of the faith"— as they are called in the scholastic treatises, for which the only question is which authority is the higher: which "interprets" which.

As a matter of fact, by its own logic, this approach demands a further contraction, a further "reduction." For if we proclaim

holy scripture to be the supreme authority for teaching the faith in the Church, then what is the "criterion" of scripture? Sooner or later it becomes "biblical science"— i.e., in the final analysis, naked reason. But if, on the other hand, we proclaim the Church to be the definitive, highest and inspired interpreter of scripture, then through whom, where and how is this interpretation brought about? And however we answer this question, this "organ" or "authority" in fact proves to be standing *over* the scriptures, as an *outside* authority. If in the first instance the meaning of scripture is dissolved in a multiplicity of private— and therefore devoid of ecclesial authority— "scientific theories," then in the second case the scriptures are considered the "raw material" for theological definition and formulation, "biblical matter" available to be "interpreted" by theological reason. And it would be incorrect to think that this position is characteristic only of the West. The very same thing, though possibly in a different manner, happens also in the Orthodox Church. For, if Orthodox theologians firmly hold to the formal principle that the authoritative interpretation of scripture belongs to the Church and is accomplished in the light of tradition, then the vital content and "practical" application of this principle remain unclear and in fact lead to a certain paralysis of the "understanding of scripture" in the life of the Church. Insofar as it exists, our

biblical scholarship finds itself entirely in the grasp of western presuppositions and timidly repeats outmoded western positions, clinging as much as possible to the “moderate,” i.e., in fact the penultimate, western theories. And as far as church preaching and piety are concerned, they too have long since ceased to be “fed” by, to find their true source in the scriptures.

This “rupture” between word and sacrament has pernicious consequences also for the doctrine on the sacraments. In it, the sacrament ceases to be biblical and, in the deepest sense of the word, *evangelical.* It was no accident, of course, that the chief focus of interest in the sacraments for western theology was not their essence and content but rather the conditions and “modi” of their accomplishment and “efficacy.” Thus, the interpretation of the eucharist revolves around the question of the method and moment of the transformation of the gifts, their conversion into the body and blood of Christ, but with almost no mention of the

meaning of this transformation for the Church, for the world, for each of us. As much as it may seem paradoxical, “interest” in the *real presence* of the body and blood of Christ replaces “interest” in Christ. Partaking of the gifts is perceived as one of the means for “receiving grace,” as an act of personal sanctification, but it ceases to be perceived as our *participation* in Christ’s cup: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mk 10:38). Alienated from the word, which is always the word of Christ (“You search the scriptures ... and it is they that bear witness to me”— Jn 5:39), the sacrament is in a certain sense torn away from Christ. Both in theology and in piety he remains, of course, their “founder,” but he ceases to be their *content*— the gift to the Church and to the faithful of his very self and of his divine-human life. Thus, the sacrament of confession is experienced not as “reconciliation and reunification with the Church in Christ Jesus” but as the *authority* to “forgive” sins; thus, the sacrament of marriage has “forgotten its foundation in “the great mystery of Christ and the Church, etc.

Yet in the liturgical and spiritual tradition of the Church, the ‘ Church’s essence as the incarnation of the Word, as the fulfilment in time and space of the divine incarnation, is realized precisely in the unbreakable link between the word and the sacrament. Thus the book of Acts can say of the *Church*: “the word... grew and multiplied” (12:24). In the sacrament we partake of him who comes and abides with us in the word, and the mission of the Church consists precisely in announcing this good news. The word presupposes the sacrament as its fulfilment, for in the sacrament Christ the Word becomes our life. The Word assembles the Church for his incarnation in her. In separation from the word the sacrament is in danger of being perceived as magic, and without the sacrament the word is in danger of being “reduced” to “doctrine.” And, finally, it is precisely through the sacrament that the word is interpreted, for the interpretation of the word is always witness to the fact that the Word has become our life. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The sacrament is his

witness, and therefore in it lies the source, the beginning and the foundation of the exposition and comprehension of the word, the source and criterion of theology.

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Only in this unbreakable unity of word and sacrament can we truly understand the meaning of the affirmation that the Church alone preserves the true meaning of scripture. That is why the necessary *beginning* of the eucharistic ceremony is the first part of the liturgy— the *sacrament of the word,* which finds its fulfilment and completion in the offering, consecration and distribution to the faithful of the eucharistic gifts.

2

In several early manuscripts of the service books the Little Entrance is called the *entrance with the gospels.* And in its contemporary form its central focus is in actuality the gospel book: it is triumphally carried out of the northern door of the iconostasis by the deacon and then brought through the royal doors and placed on the altar. Taking into consideration what was said above about the original meaning of the Little Entrance as the entrance of the celebrant and the people into the temple, it is obvious that the "entrance with the gospels" is, as it were, its second "form." In antiquity, after the entrance into the temple the celebrant and the concelebrating clergy assumed "their places" to listen to the scriptures. Today, the original Little Entrance having ceased to be the real beginning of the liturgy, it is precisely the "entrance with the gospels" that has taken over the meaning of this procession. In order to understand this meaning, it is necessary to say a few words about the original "topography" of the church building.

In contemporary practice, the altar is the natural and self-evident "place" of the celebrant and the clergy. But in ancient times this was not so. *Approach* to the altar and serving at it was restricted exclusively to the liturgy of the faithful, i.e., the offering and consecration of the holy gifts— the eucharist in the strict sense of the term. The celebrant would go up to the altar only at the moment of the offering of the gifts. The rest of the time— just as in fhe services of the daily and yearly cycle— the place of the celebrant and the clergy was on the "bema," i.e., among the people. This is indicated to this very day by the location of the bishop's throne— in the middle of the church among the Russians, on the

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right side of the ambo among the Greeks. And in fact even now, the most important parts of the non-eucharistic services— the *polye-leion,* for example— are performed in the middle of the church and not in the altar. Thus, the altar table was exclusively the *table* of the Lord's supper, the sacrificial table on which the bloodless sacrifice was offered. The service had, as it were, two centers: one in the gathering itself and another at the altar. Therefore the first part of the liturgy— the "assembly as the Church," the listening to the scriptures and the homily— took place not in the altar but in the temple, with the celebrant and the clergy having assumed their special places on the bema. The *entrance* into the temple (the first meaning of the Little

Entrance) was followed by the ascent of the celebrant and the clergy to “their place” for the celebration of the liturgy of the word (the second meaning of the Little Entrance), and after this, their ascent into the sanctuary and to the altar table for the offering and consecration of the gifts (the current Great Entrance). Through these three “entrances” (processions) the fundamental symbolism of the gathering of the Church as her ascent to the kingdom of God was expressed.

What caused the disruption and alteration of this original order was, in the first place, the disappearance of the first entrance— the entrance into the temple— and, secondly, the gradual disappearance of the bema as the place of the celebrant and the clergy during virtually all services *except the eucharist itself.* This disappearance was furthered when the gospel book began to be kept on the altar. During the persecution of Christianity, the gospels were not kept in the temple, as one form of persecution of the Church was confiscation of the holy books. Therefore, at each liturgy the gospel book was brought into the church from outside. But with the cessation of persecution and the appearance of majestic Christian basilicas, the place for the keeping of the gospels naturally became the temple, and in it, its “holy of holiest— the altar. The altar became the focus of both parts of the liturgy, although in different ways. Thus, in the so-called liturgy of the catechumens, as well as in all non-eucharistic services, the gospels are *brought out* from the altar and to this day are read in the middle of the church, on the ambo or from the cathedra, while the eucharist is always performed at the altar.

All these “technical” details are necessary for us only in order

to show that the Little Entrance gradually united three fundamental dimensions: the beginning of the eucharist as *entrance* into the assembly; then, the fulfilment of this first entrance in the ascent, in the entrance of the Church into the heavenly sanctuary (the prayer and singing of the Trisagion, the approach to the altar); and, finally, the fulfilment of this beginning of the liturgy in the “sacrament of the word.”

Returning now to the “entrance with the gospels,” we can say that it is no less important for an understanding of the liturgy of the word and its connection with the eucharist than is the basic act of the reading of the holy scriptures. Here we find a parallelism with the eucharist, in which the consecration of the gifts is preceded by the *offering.* It is appropriate here to recall that the gospels are part of the Orthodox liturgical tradition not only in their reading, but precisely as a *book.* This book is rendered the same reverence as an icon or the altar. We are called to kiss it and to cense it, and the people of God are blessed with it. Finally, in several rites— the *cheirotonia* of a bishop, the sacraments of confession and holy unction, etc.— the gospels take part as a *book,* and not as one or another text contained in it. This is because, for the Church, the gospel book is a verbal icon of Christ’s manifestation to and presence among us. Above all, it is an icon of his resurrection. The entrance with the gospels is therefore not a “representation,” a sacred dramatization of events of the past— e.g., Christ’s going out to preach (in which case it would be not the deacon, but the celebrant, as the image of Christ in the ecclesial

assembly, who should carry the gospel book). It is the image of the appearance of the risen Lord in fulfilment of his promise: “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). As the consecration of the eucharistic gifts is preceded by their offering at the sacrificial table, so the reading and proclamation of the word is preceded by its *appearance.* The “entrance with the gospels” is a meeting, a joyous meeting with Christ, and this meeting is accomplished by means of the bringing out to us of this book of books, the book that is always transformed into power, life and sanctification.

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“Peace be unto all!” the celebrant proclaims to the assembly, and the people answer him: “And to your spirit.” We have already pointed out that *Peace* is the name of Christ himself. The western form of this greeting is *Dominus vobiscum,* “the Lord be with you.” And this greeting, with which the celebrant addresses the Church before each new part of the eucharistic ceremony— before the reading of the word of God, before the kiss of peace, before the distribution of communion— is each time a reminder that Christ himself is “in our midst,” that he himself heads our eucharist, for he himself is “the Offerer and the Offered, the Receiver and the Received.”

Then the *prokeimenon* is intoned. This word, which in Greek means “what is set forth”— i.e., what *precedes*— is now used to refer to two or three verses of the psalms, sung antiphonally— by the reader and the people, or the choir. In antiquity the prokeimenon usually consisted of the entire psalm, the singing of which “preceded” the reading of holy scripture. And since the prokeimenon to this day occupies a special and undoubtedly important place in Orthodox worship, it is necessary to say a few words about it.

In order to understand the prokeimenon, we must first recall the special place the psalms held in the early Church. Without exaggeration it could be said that in the early Church the psalms were not only one of the prophetic or liturgical “high points” of the Old Testament, but a kind of special “revelation inside the revelation.” If all scripture prophesies about Christ, the exceptional significance of the psalms lies in the fact that in them Christ is revealed as though from “within.” These are *his* words, *his* prayer: “*...ipse Dominus Jesus Christus locutus*,” “the Lord Jesus Christ himself speaks in them” (Augustine).[2] And because they are his words, they are also the prayer and words of his body, the Church. “In this book speak, pray and weep only Jesus Christ and his Church,” writes Augustine. “These many members, united in the bonds of love and peace under one head— our Savior— constitute, as you know... one man. And in the better part of

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[2] *Enarratio in Ps. XXX,* 11, PL 36:237.

the psalms, their voice sounds as the voice of one man. He implores for all, because all are one in unity."[3] This understanding, this *experience* of the psalms also lies at the heart of their liturgical usage. Thus, for example, it is impossible to understand the pre-eminent place of Psalm 119 ("Blessed are those whose way is blameless") in matins of Holy Saturday unless we know that in this lengthy confession of love for the "law of God," for his will, for his design for the world and mankind, the Church in a way hears the voice of the Lord himself, as he lies in the tomb and reveals to us the meaning of his lifegiving death. In this way, the psalms are not only a divinely inspired "exegesis," an explanation of scripture and the events of sacred history. In them is expressed and incarnated and handed down to us that spiritual *reality* that allows us to comprehend the true meaning both of the sacred texts and of the rites.

The *prokeimenon*— "the psalm that precedes"— *introduces* us to the sacrament of the word. For the word of God is addressed not to the reason alone, but to the whole man— to his depths or, in the language of the holy fathers, to his *heart,* which is also an organ of religious knowledge, in contrast to the imperfect, discursive and rational knowledge of "this world." The "opening of the mind" precedes the hearing and understanding of the word: "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Lk 24:45). We can say that the joyous, repeated exclamation of the prokeimenon, its "communication" to the assembly and its acceptance by the gathering also express that moment in worship of the "opening of the mind," its union with the *heart,* when we listen to the word of the scriptures, the word of the Lord.

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After the prokeimenon comes the reading of the *epistle,* i.e., a passage from the second— the "apostolic"— part of the New Testament. We have every reason to think that in antiquity the reading of holy scripture included passages from the Old Testament. A detailed study of the "lectionary," i.e., the princi-

ples on which the liturgical distribution of the reading of holy scripture was based, belongs to that part of liturgical theology that I call the *liturgy of time,*[4] and therefore we may put aside its explanation for now. It is enough to say that the *lectionary* experienced a long and complex evolution, and that one of the vital tasks of our time consists in reviewing it in the light of our contemporary liturgical "situation." In order to grasp the seriousness of this issue, it is enough to recall that the current lectionary excludes the greater part of the Old Testament from liturgical reading. As for the New Testament, since the lectionary is constructed on the presupposition of

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[3] *Enarratio in Ps. LXIX,* 1, PL 36:866.

[4] See Schmemann*, Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 49-57.

a daily liturgy, only a comparatively small part of the New Testament texts actually reaches the ears and consciousness of the faithful. Hence the striking ignorance of the holy scriptures among the overwhelming majority of Orthodox and, stemming from this ignorance, the absence of interest in them. They are not perceived as the chief, incomparable and truly *saving* source of faith and life. In our Church the "akathist" is immeasurably more popular than the scriptures. Inasmuch as all our worship is structured in a "biblical" key, this ultimately leads to incomprehension of the services, to a rupture between liturgical piety and the genuine meaning of the *lex orandi,* the rule of prayer.

After the epistle the gospel is read. The reading is preceded by the singing of the *alleluia* and the *censing.* In contemporary practice the alleluia verses take up no more than two or three minutes, allowing the deacon time only to take the gospel book from the priest and proceed toward the ambo. As a result, the censing is not done as prescribed— during the singing of the alleluia— but rather during the reading of the epistle. Finally, the celebrants prayer before the reading of the gospel, in which the Church asks God to "open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings," is now read silently, depriving the faithful of the opportunity of hearing it. All this, taken together, obscures the original meaning of the *rite* of the liturgy of the word. Nevertheless, this rite is important for understanding the link betweeen the liturgy of the word and the sacrament of the eucharist, and therefore it is necessary to say a few words about it.

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Our first consideration here must be the singing of the alleluia verses, which in antiquity comprised an important part of all Christian worship. Inherited by Christianity from Hebrew worship, the alleluia belongs to the type of the so-called *melismatic* singing. In the history of church music, melismatic, as opposed to *psalmodic,* refers to a form in which the melody takes precedence over the word. One may suppose that before the appearance of more "learned" hymnology— troparia, kontakia, stichera, in which the music and the text mutually define each other— the Church knew only two types of singing, corresponding to two fundamental aspects of the Christian perception of worship. *Psalmodic* singing, i.e., the melodic, rhythmic and musical reading of the psalms, scriptures and prayers, expressed the *verbal* nature of Christian worship, its inner subordination to the word: the holy scriptures, the apostolic witness, the tradition of faith. *Melismatic* singing, however, expressed the experience of worship as a real contact with the *transcendent* an entry into the supernatural reality of the kingdom. Whatever was the source of melismatic singing— and there are several scholarly theories about its origin— there is no doubt that in early Christian worship it occupied a significant place and that one of its chief expressions was precisely the singing of the *alleluia.* For this term itself is not simply a word, but a certain melodic exclamation. Its logical content can of course be translated with the words "praise God," but by this content it is not exhausted and not in fact translated, for the word itself *is* a transport of joy and praise before the appearance of the Lord, a "reaction" to his coming. The historian of religion G. Van der Leeuw writes that, "when moved by the pres-

ence of God, man cries out." He "lifts up" his voice. "But the most important type of profoundly emotional utterance is *praise*: the *song of praise.*[5] The alleluia is a *greeting* in the most profound sense of the term. And a genuine greeting, in the words of the same Van der Leeuw, is "always a confirmation of a fact." It presupposes a *manifestation* and it is a reaction to this manifestation. The alleluia verses precede the reading of the gospel because, as we have already said above, the appearance of the Lord in the "assembly as the Church" and his opening of the minds of the faith-

ful precedes the *hearing.* The ancient melody of the alleluia has come down to us as a sound, a melody expressing the joy and praise and experience of a presence that is more real than any words, than any explanations.

At the same time as the singing of the alleluia— and not during the reading of the epistle, as is usually the case today— the *censing* of the gospel book and of the assembly takes place. This ancient religious rite, common to a multitude of religions, was not immediately accepted by the Church because of its ties with pagan cults: in the era of persecution, Christians were ordered to burn incense before images of the emperor, thus rendering him divine worship. But it subsequently entered into church worship precisely as a "natural" religious rite, in which everything— the burning charcoal and incense transformed into fragrance and ascending to heaven as smoke— "expresses" the creatures' adoration of the Creator and his holiness, present among the people.

The celebrant reads the *prayer before the gospel,* in which he asks God to send down the "pure light of Thy divine knowledge. Open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings." This prayer, which is now read silently, occupies the same place in the sacrament of the word that the *epiklesis*, the supplication for the Father to send down his Holy Spirit, occupies in the eucharistic prayer. 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. The blessing that the priest bestows on the deacon as he is about to read the gospel testifies to this: "May God.. .enable you to proclaim the glad tidings with *great power, to the fulfillment of the gospel..."*

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The homily is a witness to the hearing of the word of God, its reception and understanding. Therefore it is organically connected to the reading of scripture and, in the early Church, constituted a necessary part of the "synaxis," an essential liturgical act of the Church. This act is the eternal self-witness of the

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[5] *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (London, 1938) 430.

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Holy Spirit, who lives in the Church and guides her into all the truth (Jn 16:15), the Spirit of truth, "whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him"— but "you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you" (Jn 14:17). In these "texts" the Church hears and recognizes, and will forever continue to recognize, hear and proclaim the word of God. Only in this way can she genuinely proclaim to "this world" the good news about Christ, can she witness to him— and not just expound her "doctrine"— because she herself always listens to the word of God, she lives by it, so that her very life is to *increase in the word'.* "And the word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly" (Ac 6:7); "So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily" (Ac 19:20).

One can observe an undoubted decline or even crisis in preaching in contemporary church life. The essence of this crisis lies not in the inability to speak, in a loss of "style" or in any intellectual deficiency on the part of the preacher, but in Something far deeper: in an oblivion to *what* preaching in the church assembly is supposed to be. The homily can be, and often is even today, intelligent, interesting, instructive and comforting, but these are not the criteria by which we can distinguish a "good" homily from a "bad" one— these are not its real essence. Its essence lies in its living link to the gospel that was read in the church assembly. For the genuine sermon is neither simply an explanation of what was read by knowledgeable and competent persons, nor a transmission to the listeners of the theological knowledge of the preacher, nor a meditation "a propos" of the gospel text. In general, it is not a sermon *about the gospel* ("on a gospel theme"), but the preaching of the gospel itself. The crisis of preaching consists chiefly in that it has become a sort of "personal" matter of the preacher. We say, for example, that a given preacher has or does not have a gift for speaking. Yet the genuine gift for speaking, for proclaiming the good news, is not an "immanent" gift of the preacher, but a charism of the Holy Spirit, given in the Church and to the Church. Genuine proclamation of the good news does not exist without faith that the "assembly as the Church" is really an assembly in the Holy Spirit, where the same one Spirit opens the preacher's lips to proclamation and the hearers' minds to acceptance of what is proclaimed.

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The condition for true preaching therefore must be precisely the complete self-denial of the preacher, the repudiation of everything that is *only his own,* even his *own* gifts and talents. The mystery of church preaching, in contrast to any purely human "gift for speaking," is accomplished, according to the words of the apostle Paul, "not [by] proclaiming [it] to you... in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.... and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Co 2:1-5). Witness to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is the content of the word of God, and this alone constitutes the essence of preaching: "And the Spirit is the witness,

because the Spirit is the truth" (1 Jn 5:7). The ambo is the place where the sacrament of the word takes place, and therefore it must never be turned into a tribune for the proclamation of even the most elevated, most positive, but only human truth, only human wisdom. "Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification" (1 Co 2:6-7).

Here we see why all church theology, all *tradition,* grows precisely out of the "assembly as the Church," out of this sacrament of proclamation of the good news. Here we see why in it is comprehended the living, and not abstract, meaning of the classic Orthodox affirmation that only the Church is given custody of the scriptures and their interpretation. For tradition is not *another* source of the faith, "complementary" to the scriptures. It is the very same source: the living word of God, always heard and received by the Church. Tradition is the interpretation of the word of God as the source of life itself, and not of any "constructions" or "deductions." When St Athanasius the Great said that "the holy and God-inspired scriptures are sufficient for the exposition of truth,"[6] he was not rejecting tradition, and still less preaching any specifically "biblical" method of theology— as a formal, terminological faithfulness to the scriptural "text"— for, as everyone

knows, in expounding the faith of the Church he himself daringly introduced the nonbiblical term *homoousios.* He was affirming precisely the living, and not formal or terminological, link between scripture and tradition, tradition as the reading and hearing of scripture in the Holy Spirit. The Church alone knows and keeps the .meaning of scripture, because in the sacrament of the word, accomplished in the church assembly, the Holy Spirit eternally gives life to the "flesh" of scripture, transforming it into "spirit and life." Any genuine theology is rooted in this sacrament of the word, in the church assembly, in which the Spirit of God exhorts the Church herself— and not simply her individual members— into all truth. Thus, any "private" reading of scripture must be rooted in the Church: outside of the mind of the Church, outside of the divine-human life of the Church it can neither be heard nor truly interpreted. So, the sacrament of the word, accomplished in the church gathering in a twofold act— reading and proclamation— is the source of the growth of each and all together into the fulness of the mind of truth.

Finally, in the sacrament of the word is revealed the collaboration of the hierarchy and the laity in the preservation of truth, which, in accordance with the famous Epistle of the Eastern Patriarchs (1869), is "entrusted to the whole people of the Church."[7] On the one hand, in preaching

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6 *Against the Pagans,* 1, PG 25:4A.

7 *"Encyclical Letter of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church to the Orthodox Christians of All Lands* (the response of the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem and the synods of Constantinople, Antioch and Jerusalem to Pius IX's encyclical of January 6, 1848 to the Christians of the East).

the gift *of teaching* is realized: it is a charism given to the celebrant as his service in the church assembly. On the other hand, and precisely because preaching is not a “personal gift” but a charism given by the Church and realized in her gathering, the teaching service of the hierarchy is not separate from the gathering but finds in it its grace-filled source. The Holy Spirit rests on the entire Church. The ministry of the celebrant is preaching and teaching. The ministry of the people of God is in accepting this teaching. But both these ministries are of the Holy Spirit, both are accomplished by him and in him. One can neither accept nor proclaim the truth without the gift of the Holy Spirit, and this gift is given to the entire assembly. For the entire Church— and not one “sector” in it— have “received not the

spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” “No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God,” and therefore those who are teaching do so “in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit,” and those who accept the teaching accept it by the Holy Spirit. “For the unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them” (1 Co 2:11-14). In the Church, the bishop and priests are given the gift of teaching, but they are given it because they are witnesses to the faith of the Church, because the teaching is not theirs but the Church’s, her unity of faith and love. Only the entire Church, manifested and actualized in the “assembly as the Church,” has the mind of Christ. Only in the church gathering are all gifts, all ministries revealed in their unity and indivisibility, as manifestations of the one Spirit, who fills the whole body. And therefore, finally, each member of the Church, whatever his “rank” in the Church, must be a witness before this world of the entire fulness of the Church, and not just his *own* understanding of it.

In antiquity, the assembly responded to the celebrant’s sermon with a triumphal *amen,* testifying by this to the acceptance of the word, sealing their unity in the Spirit with the celebrant. Here, in this *amen* of the people of God, is the source and principle of that “reception” of teaching by church consciousness, of which Orthodox theologians speak so often, contraposing it to the Roman division of the Church into the *learning* Church and the *teaching* Church, and also to Protestant individualism. But if it is so difficult to explain in what this “reception” consists and in what manner it is realized, perhaps this is because in our own consciousness we have almost entirely forgotten that this act is rooted in the church assembly and in the sacrament of the word accomplished in it.

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