The Liturgy of the Eucharist - Part 2

The Liturgy of the Eucharist Communion and Belonging

True belongingness to the church and genuine Orthodox life do not take place except through the liturgical life especially through the holy mysteries and particularly through the Eucharist. St. Paul says “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

- We raise our eyes towards the altar to find the one Body of Christ and come to realize that the mystery of our fellowship with each other is through our union with the Head of the body the Lord Jesus Christ.
- St. Augustine beautifully described this truth addressing believers, “You are on the table, you are inside the cup and the tray. The secret of our peace and unity is on the altar.”
- This is the secret of our membership in the church because church membership in its deep theological meaning is the assemblage of believers who together participate in the offering with one faith and one heart in order to delight in the mystery of Salvation and forgiveness. Hence, the success of any church service concerning believers depends on the power of the entire church – priests and servants – to bond her children and congregation with the altar and the continuous partaking of the Holy Communion.

The Eucharist: Weaponry and Nourishment

The liturgical life is the strongest spiritual weaponry in our struggle against Satan; for, it extends its power from the grace of God existing on the altar. We, in the Eucharist, beat our enemies through Christ, Himself, Whom we have chosen to dwell in us.

- Notice the amount of power and courage bestowed on you through partaking of the Holy Communion. St. John Chrysostom describes this power saying, “let us return from this banquet like lions the fire of love ignited in us and the devils scared of us.” The Holy Book of Revelation informs us about the victorious people, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).
- This holy Divine Liturgy is the banquet that David had seen and said about it, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;...” (Psalm 23:5).

This is our weapon “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4).
Let us understand that the Liturgy of the Eucharist is a great mystery revealed to all the weak, the beaten and the defeated provided they approach with the spirit of repentance and contrition in order to receive a triumphant power from the offering, the victorious lion “...the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David...” (Revelation 5:5).

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist there is divine nourishment essential for life, steadfastness and growth. Suffice what our Lord said, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). If the spirit feeds on prayers and praises and the word of God, more so would the spirit get nourished by the life of the mystical liturgy through the Eucharist that grants life to those who partake of it.

- St. Ambrose beautifully wrote, “How could one die whose food is the Life ?”
- To the believers – the secret of victory awaits us on the alter…do not give in nor grow cold but be punctual in uniting regularly with the offering so that this liturgical life may become vivid in your behavior. Whoever is weak let him be strong in the Lord and who is miserable and defeated let him take courage and rise up.

The Eucharist is Sanctification

One of the greatest gains of the Eucharist is the sanctification it grants us through union with the Lord the holy: “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter1:16).

+ St. Cyril the Great confirms this truth saying, “He has given us His true body and blood so that through them all the power of wickedness dissipate and we become partners by holiness.”

- The Eucharist imparts to us from the holy nature of God and protects us from the evil of sin and the elements of squandering. Thus we get purified from the weakness and frailty of the spirit. In addition, the Eucharist grants our bodies purification and sanctification in order to become partners in spirit and emotions and all that is in us so that we may pursue God and unite with Him. So, by partaking in the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist we receive the Lord Jesus Christ inside us and the Lord does not enter a place without sanctifying, purifying and blessing that place.

- During the Liturgy of the Eucharist we pray, “Make us all worthy, O our Master, to partake of Your Holies, unto the purification of our souls, bodies, and spirits, that we may become one body and one spirit, and may have a share and inheritance with all the saints who have pleased You since the beginning” (Divine Liturgy according to St. Basil). Therefore the Eucharist is divine dynamics that sanctify the whole being: spirit, soul, body and emotions.

The Eucharist is Life Above Time

Every liturgy we experience aims basically at preparing the soul for the kingdom of God and eternal life as a destination sought by every believer. The effectiveness of the mystery of the Eucharist lies in sanctifying, preparing, and vitalizing the soul to be fit for dwelling with the
heavenly bride in eternity. This is revealed in the Lord’s words “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day...He who eats this bread will live forever” (John 6:54,58).

Using the scholarly style of theologians, we can say that the Liturgy of the Eucharist has “another” or “eschatological” action which is above time. In the Divine Liturgy, as we take life from the Son of God, we proclaim that God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son “He who has the Son has life“ (1 John 5:12).

- Through Holy Communion we enjoy, while on earth, the pledge of our indescribable joy that awaits us in heaven. Our gathering around the alter is an example of our gathering around the Lamb who sits on the throne in heaven; and the praises of the faithful during the Divine Liturgy is a preparation for the continuous ceaseless praises in heaven.

Lectures from the Christian History - The Third Century

The First Article

The third century is considered one rich in history and events as well as persons. The third century witnessed the birth of St. Anthony the Great, St. Paul the First Hermit, and St. Macarius the institutors of monasticism in the entire world. During the third century the Coptic Orthodox church initiated her own Coptic calendar of the martyrs. In addition, general persecution was at its summit during the third century.

Pope Heraclas (the 13th pope)

The beginning of the third century was not better than the previous one; for tribulation would start, then subside only to start again soon. After the death of Pope Demetrius the vinedresser (the twelfth pope), Pope Heraclas came to the papal See of Alexandria. Born in Alexandria of pagan parents, he studied at the Theological School of Alexandria and was disciplined by Origen. His scholarly performance reached Pope Demetrius who ordained him deacon and then priest. He was appointed dean of the Theological School of Alexandria after the departure of Origen due to the dissension between him and the pope. It was also given to him to deliver sermons in the church of St. Mark in Alexandria and through his gentle manner, he could draw to Christianity a large number of pagan youths. In the year 224, during the empire of Severus Alexander, after the death of Pope Demetrius all the priests, bishops and congregation nominated him to the See of St. Mark. Because of the great love the people had for him, they
would call him “papa” and so he became the first bishop on an apostolic see to be labeled “pope” a tradition later on adopted by the other apostolic sees.

Among the achievements of this pope was the increase in the number of the catechumens and baptized individuals as well as in the number of dioceses and bishops. However, his reign witnessed severe persecution inflicted by the Roman Emperor Maximinus. So, his brethren advised him to stay away from his see until things would become quieter. Thus he left Alexandria to Upper Egypt and after sometime he returned back.

It remains to narrate the great miracle that took place in Jerusalem at the hands of the bishop “Narcissuss” during the papacy of this pope. With the powerful prayers of this saintly bishop, water turned into oil to suffice the oil shortage before the Holy Week. Many other miracles took place because of this bishop’s holiness.

Pope Heraclas rested in peace in 241 AD after having lived the epochs of six Roman emperors namely, Alexander, Severus, Maximinus, Pupienus, Gordianus, and Philippus.

With regard to the Roman Empire, the third century started with Septimius Severus being on the throne. Christians were persecuted during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus. He followed the long established policies of not seeking out Christians but if anyone was accused of being Christian, they had to either renounce our Lord Jesus Christ or be executed. He wanted to limit the spread of Christianity so he issued a decree outlawing conversions to Christianity. After him came his son Caracalla who treated Christians very well to the extent that made them call him the “half Christian”. However, this emperor was not mentally stable, his abnormal behavior swaying between hasty animosity and often brutality. It was narrated that once he came to Alexandria after having heard a lot of complaints from the inhabitants. He spread a rumor that he would choose a whole militia from the brave youths in Alexandria. So, a large number of those who had patriotic zeal gathered in the place designated. The emperor gave an order to his soldiers to work their way with their swords and a great massacre took place that caused Alexandria to wail and bemoan those innocent valiant martyrs who had lost their lives innocently.

After the death of Caracalla in 217, three emperors, Geta, Macrinus, and Elagabalus came but had no impact in Alexandria worth mentioning. Besides, the city was further away from the corruption taking place in the Emperor’s palace. In 222 AD, Severus Alexander sat on the throne and his epoch was a peaceful one for the church in Egypt which caused her to grow and spread. In 235 AD, Maximinus Thrax succeeded and his era was full of atrocious persecution for Egypt and the Copts to the extent that the Pope Heraclas and his bishops had to flee and hide for three years till the death of the emperor in 238 AD.

**Pope Dionysius (the 14th pope)**
In the year 241 AD, Pope Dionysius succeeded Pope Heraclas. In his youth, he was a pagan but the grace of God attracted him. He read some of St. Paul’s epistles and found someone who encouraged him to read more. Being delighted by them and through the grace of God working in his heart, he was baptized by Pope Demetrius. Later he joined the School of Theology and became a disciple of Origen. It was said that his excellence in the philosophical disciplines helped him to draw many philosophers to Christianity.

Dionysius’ great zeal for spiritual service caused Pope Demetrius the Vinedresser (191-224) to ordain him a deacon and a priest shortly after. He continued in spiritual service and shepherding for a long time till the death of Pope Heraclas after which he was unanimously nominated for the papal see in the year 241 AD during the reign of Emperor Philippus whose period passed peacefully with no persecution worth mentioning. However, Emperor Decius, his successor, came persecuting the Christians knowing that if he knocked the shepherd down, it would be easy to disperse the Christians and subsequently eradicate Christianity. The Pope fled after attempts to capture him had failed. He wrote a very emotional letter to the bishops who had criticized him for having escaped as well as another message to the Pope of Antioch stating the amount of atrocities and horror the Copts had undergone as a result of persecution and thus urging him to stand steadfast to death in the love of Christ.

After the death of Emperor Decius, Pope Dionysius returned to his seat safely. He courageously wrote a letter to the new Emperor Gallus, son of Decius explaining how the Christians had suffered because of his father’s persecutions. The message left a powerful impact on the emperor’s heart though not for long.

In the forties of the second century a plague broke out in the Roman Empire killing a large number of people. The pagan priests instigated in the emperor’s mind that the epidemic was caused by the god’s wrath because he had left Christianity to spread in the world. As a result, the Emperor changed his policy with the Christians and a severe persecution took place from which the Copts were not exempted. This persecution continued till the Emperor’s death in 253 AD. Valerian became emperor in the same year. After the heat of persecution calmed down Pope Dionysius visited his people in Egypt who were about to be dispersed had it not been because of Christ’s care to this vine that He had blessed when He came to this land.

On his arrival to Fayoum, Pope Dionysius found bishop Nepos of Arsino (in the periphery of present-day Fayoum diocese) propagating the teachings about the millennium alleging the approach of this end time and subsequently interpreting the Holy Book of Revelation literally contrary to the teachings of the Orthodox church. So, with the wisdom and meekness of the good shepherd, Pope Dionysius embarked upon treating the matter quietly and in love. He called for a three day council to discuss this difficult heresy aroused by Nepos and all his followers till they returned back to the proper faith of the church.
When Valerian mounted the empire in the year 253, matters remained calm for a few years after which things changed and the Emperor launched persecution against the Christians accusing them of having allegedly aroused the anger of the gods. In 257, many Coptic Christians were killed and Pope Dionysius was arrested and brought before the emperor's deputy in Alexandria who ordered him to bow down to the pagan gods and offer incense before them. At the Pope’s refusal, he was scourged severely regardless of his old age and exiled along with some of his Coptic brethren. However, our good God who is capable of drawing good out of bad, caused the Pope to be discharged by Emperor Valerian’s son Aemilianus who sympathized with him and gave him a written permit to hold spiritual meetings without opposition.

This honeymoon did not last long but was soon followed with troubles aroused by Satan in the heresy of one of the Ptalmic bishops, Sabellius (meaning the father suffered) in the five western cities. His heresy is summarized in God being one hypostasis, who gave the law in the Old Testament as the Father and became man in the New Testament and later descended on the disciples as the Holy Spirit in the upper room. Later, after having been excommunicated by Callixtus, bishop of Rome, Sabellius came to Egypt and started to spread his heresy which found acceptance by many. But he was strongly resisted by Pope Dionysius who ended up excommunicating him at a council convened in 261 to discuss this heresy. However Sabellius’ followers did not stop but tried to arouse the bishop of Rome against the Alexandrian pope. The latter sent a message to the former explaining the annulment of Sabellius heretic dogma.

Towards the last few years of Pope Dionysius’ life, there appeared Paul of Samosata, Patriarch of Antioch who, in addition to the lavish life style he had been leading and the strong authority he had acquired from the ruling authorities in tax collecting, introduced yet another heresy stating that the Son of God was not eternal but had his beginning when he was born Jesus the man; and through the bestowal of the Wisdom of God on the man Jesus, he was able to perform miracles. Thus two hypostasis existed in Jesus; (God and man) and two sons to God (one by nature and the other by adoption). These heresies and the complaints from the congregation against this man’s unacceptable behavior as a bishop and shepherd of the church, hastened the calling of a council to discuss his thoughts and beliefs. Soon the council reached a decision to excommunicate Paul of Samosata and appoint the pious monk Dominus instead of him. Paul tried to hold on to his status by force prompting the bishops to send to the Emperor Valerian who in turn decreed that the bishopric should go to whom the bishops had appointed.

After a long struggle against emperors and governors, and relentless efforts against the heretics in order to preserve the true Orthodox faith, Pope Dionysius reposed in the Lord in 262 AD after having written a large number of homilies about the Orthodox faith and the atrocities of the persecution that had befallen the Copts of Egypt. This respectable pope lived the reign of five emperors: Philippus, Decius, Gallus, Valerian, and Aemilianus.