

PRAYING THE LITURGY

A Monk of the Eastern Orthodox Church

ST TIKHON ORTHODOX MISSION

Preface: *These pages are not a new translation of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, neither are they a rigid commentary on this liturgy. They contain no historical explanations or theological developments. They are merely "notes," i.e. short remarks that set off certain passages of the text of the liturgy, certain principle themes of this long and very rich prayer which St. John Chrysostom took from Antioch to Constantinople in the fourth century and which, in its main lines, is found already fixed in the Greek manuscripts of the eighth century. We have wished to "orient" the attention and reflection of the faithful towards certain spiritual heights of this text. We have not written for the learned, but for the laity, men and women, and even for school children, for souls that are the least familiar with dogmatic discussions and who never the less want some clear and elementary notions of the liturgy.*

A few words on the general structure of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom will perhaps be useful. Just like all the ancient Christian liturgies, that which we now have in mind brings together two types of liturgical gathering: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. First there is the liturgy of the Word, centered around the double "word" of man addressing himself to God and of God addressing Himself to man. Man addresses himself to God through the "litanies," the series of requests expressed by the priest or by the deacon in the name of the gathering and interrupted by hymns and portions of the bible (primarily the Psalms) and also by the so-called "secret" prayers recited by the priest. The "Little Entrance" of the priest with the book of the gospels already indicates that this part of the liturgy converges toward the written Word of God. In fact, after the prayer of glorification of God (the "Trisagion," repeated three times), the Epistle and the Gospel of the day are read and are followed by a homily. Next begins the Eucharistic liturgy. The bread and the wine are brought to the Holy Table. This is the "Great Entrance," followed by the recitation of the Creed. After this the priest reads the great eucharistic prayer which includes the thanksgiving for all the gifts of God, the mention from the Gospel of the institution of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the invocation of the Holy Spirit on ourselves and on the offered elements. This long prayer, interrupted by certain intercessions and commemorations, ends with the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father ..."). The communion is then distributed to the faithful. The liturgy ends with rather brief intercessions and benedictions.

Such are the great lines of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. This booklet intends to isolate certain elements of this liturgy in order to present them better to the attention and the prayer of the reader.

Many have already done that which we have attempted to do here. They have done it much better than we. The only merits of this little booklet, if there are any, are its simplicity and brevity. May God grant that our booklet, as poor as it is, be of help to certain souls and help them adore in spirit and in truth!

A Monk of the Eastern Church
Beirut Lebanon, Christmas, 1971

In Peace:

The great litany supplication with which the Holy Liturgy begins opens with a fervent request that peace be granted to us.

In fact, this request is so important, so fundamental, that it returns three times, in forms that are slightly different. These are not superfluous repetitions, but these three requests are each filled with a deep and special meaning.

"In peace, let us pray to the Lord." It is a matter, first of all, of putting ourselves into a state of inner peace. He who is about to take part in the Holy Liturgy must put away from his mind every upset, every openness to the temptations of the flesh and the earth, every obsession with the "affairs" of this world, every hostile feeling towards anyone, every personal distress. He must put himself before God in a state of calm, of confident attention, of concentration on the "one thing that is necessary."

And, immediately, there comes a second request: "For the peace from above and for the salvation of our souls, let us pray to the Lord." The peace which we have already asked is something other than a state of soul, a psychological attitude done by our own effort. It is a peace which comes "from on high." We must recognize humbly that it is a gift of God, and we must open ourselves to this gift and stretch out our hands to it. On the other hand, we recognize that the peace of God and the "salvation" of our soul are intimately connected. Peace is a sign of the presence and of the action of the Savior within us.

Finally, there comes a third request for peace. "For the peace of the whole world, for the good estate of the holy churches of God, and for the union of all men, let us pray to the Lord." The peace which we ask surpasses our own isolated persons and it takes on practical applications. We pray for the peace of the universe, not only for men, but for all creatures, for the animals, the planets, for the stars and all nature. Thus we enter into a cosmic piety, we sympathize with all to whom God has given existence. We pray for all the disciples of Christ and also that God be adored "in spirit and in truth" by all. We pray that wars, the struggle between the classes, nations and races of the world might be stopped. We pray that all men everywhere might be united in one and the same truth and love.

Every temple of the Lord is a house of his Presence and a house of prayer. Every temple is also a temple of Christ's peace. May the soul of all those who enter this temple and who are going to take part in the assembly of God itself become a house of peace!

The Entrance of the Holy Angles

A procession is now formed. A procession makes its way toward the sanctuary. It is the so-called "Little Entrance." What does this Little Entrance mean?

Its meaning is to be found in the prayer which the priest says during the procession: "Grant that with our entrance there may also be an entrance of the Holy Angles who along with us serve Your goodness."

The Angles are going to be present in our gathering. They are going to pray with us and for each of us. For we are surrounded by the multitudes of armies of Angels. They protect us, they help us, they love us. We must try to enter into a relationship of confidence and affection towards the Angels.

Note that the text of the Liturgy says that the Angles and we serve the "goodness" of God. It is not said here that we serve the glory of God or His power. The stress is put on God's "goodness." Certainly the glory of God is the fruit of His goodness and the power of God puts this goodness into action. But it is first towards the goodness of God that the Liturgy directs our attention. The rite of the Little Entrance is an entrance into this goodness of God which the Angels know so better than we. It is our entrance into that goodness to which that prayer we so constantly repeat at the Liturgy appeals; "Lord, have mercy!"

The Entrance of God's Word

In the procession of the Little Entrance, the book of the 4 Holy gospels is carried by the deacon or priest. The procession stops before the Royal Doors of the iconostasis. He who holds the book lifts it up, presenting it to the faithful, and he says: "Wisdom! Let us attend!" Then he enters the sanctuary and the gospel book is placed on the Holy Table.

The Little Entrance is not only the entrance of the Angels. It is also the entrance of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ into the heart of each of us. The proclamation "Wisdom!" means that the gospel is the supreme Wisdom, the divine and revealed Wisdom, which infinitely surpasses all human knowledge. The exhortation "Let us attend!" indicates with what great respect we must receive the Word of the Lord.

This presentation of the Gospel to the faithful is an appeal to hear and to follow the Word of the Master.

The book of the Gospels will remain on the Holy Table during all the rest of the Liturgy. The "Holy Gifts" which will be used for the Lord's Supper are also going to be put there. So the Church teaches us that we cannot separate the heavenly and invisible food which is the word of God from participation in the Eucharistic food which is the body and blood of the Savior. On the Holy Table, the book of the Gospels remains upright, in a sort of way standing there, like someone who gets up and who calls to us. In this Little Entrance, has the Gospel of Jesus really made its entrance into my heart?

The Approach to God Which is Repentance

Our Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom does not begin like certain other Christian liturgies with a special prayer of confession of sins and a declaration of God's forgiveness. However all these elements are to be found in our Liturgy, although in a less formal way. They are found in the prayer which the priest reads before the reading of the Epistle. Unfortunately, because it is read silently the faithful do not know it.

This prayer in fact contains the following words: "You do not despise the sinner but have established change of heart as a way of salvation ... O Master, receive from the lips of us sinners the Thrice-Holy Hymn and visit us with the riches of Your goodness. Forgive us every sin, whether voluntary or involuntary. Sanctify our souls and our bodies..."

Everything that has to be said is said here. There is no enumeration of our faults or sins, but there is a humble recognition of our state as sinners and a confident recourse to the mercy of God.

In this prayer the priest also tells God: "You have made us worthy, us Your humble and unworthy servants, even at this hour..." God has made us worthy to stand before the Table of the Lord. Note the calm, filial assurance of this prayer. We do not say; "Make us worthy." But, "You have made us worthy." We have no doubt that our merciful Lord has already answered our aspiration toward the grace of His forgiveness in restoring us once again to our true state -- that of being His beloved and forgiven sons and daughters.

Peace be to All

These words are those which the priest as he turns to the faithful with a gesture of blessing, repeats the most often during the rest of the Liturgy.

At the beginning of this booklet we saw the meaning and the importance of the prayer for peace, a prayer that is repeated so often by the priest or the deacon.

These words, "Peace be to all" are in some way the response which God makes to our prayer. But we have become so used to this formula "Peace be to all" that most of us are no longer able to feel the value and the weight of that which they bring to us.

When the priest extends his hand over the faithful and greets them with "Peace be to all," he is passing on to them a reality. He is conferring a gift, a grace, on God's behalf. The peace, not our peace, but the peace which comes to us from God, descends on us and enters into us.

Do we feel this peace in our heart? Are we really aware that the Savior is giving us His peace? Do we really believe that His peace so given us, and given us many times at that has within it all the means of calming our upsets, our sufferings? Perhaps we have heard hundreds of times this "Peace be to all" in the Liturgy without ever having given it our serious attention. The right moment has now come for us to finally try, with a new heart, to accept and preserve within us this peace of Jesus which has been offered to us.

Amen

Amen is that one word said the most often by the faithful during all the Liturgy. It is the response of the people to the prayers which the priest or deacon are saying aloud.

What does our "Amen" mean? Amen is a Hebrew word. It means that the thing we are speaking of is certain, firmly established. You can rely on it as true. To say Amen is to make a sort of engagement, a commitment. Amen concerns each of those who say it personally.

In fact, we have heard this "Amen" so often, we have said "Amen" so often, that the word has lost much of its force and punch for us. We have made of "Amen" a sort of automatic reaction to certain words of the Liturgy. Instead of this "it is most firmly so" which is the original meaning of "Amen," we have made it a luke warm consent, a half-hearted agreement: "Oh yes, I would like that. Let it be that way!" We no longer feel that our entire life, our entire being are somehow implicated in an act of faith and of burning confidence.

Let us begin even today, at this Liturgy in which we are participating today, let us begin to give our "Amen" the power and meaning it ought to have for us. Let us make of each "Amen" an enthusiastic leap towards God, a cry which unites us to His will and to His Word.

The Pure Light

The Epistle has just been read. Now the Gospel is going to be read. Before this reading the priest reads a prayer which begins this way: "Make to shine in our hearts, O Master who loves mankind, the pure light of Your divine knowledge."

As we have already said, the Liturgy is not only a gathering of the faithful around the Lord's Supper. It is also a gathering around His Word. It is a gathering around the Gospel, just as it is a gathering around the bread and the cup. In the announcement of the Gospel, in the genuine reception of this message, we are going to find ourselves in living contact with Him who is the "Light of the world."

This Light "shines in the darkness." This means that it is surrounded by the darkness and by hostiles powers, but that nonetheless it can never be conquered by the night. This affirmation is true of all the vast world which surrounds us. It is also true of each one of us individually. For each one of us bears within himself, at the same moment, a power of darkness and a Light which can never be put out.

Let us prepare ourselves to hear the Gospel by opening ourselves to the Light. May this Light, this knowledge which comes from God and not from our own efforts, this inner Light which emanates from the Lord Jesus and which shines around Him, guide each of our steps along the way! Yes, each one of our steps, for there are no little things in the life of the spirit; the letter that I will write, the conversation I will have, the use that I will make of time can be guided by God just as much as the great decisions which seem to concern all my life. And may this Light shed its light for me not only on that path wished for me by God which I must walk, but also the spiritual landscape, putting every man and every thing in the place assigned to it by God's will! O Light of the world, make me grow from one degree of glory to another!

Our Souls and Bodies

The priest continues to read the prayer before the Gospel. And he reads these words: "For You are the illumination of our souls and of our bodies, O Christ our God..."

Illumination of our bodies? We can understand well enough that the Light of the world illumines our souls. But how, in what measure does He illumine our bodies?

A few lines earlier, this same prayer before the Gospel says: "...so that having trampled down all the desires of the flesh..." Can the flesh itself be trampled down and filled with light?

The flesh, in and of itself, is a good thing, created by God and blessed by God. Wounded and weakened by the sin of our first parents, the flesh often becomes the origin of all sorts of temptations; it can become a wall of separation, selfishly enclosed, an instrument of struggle against the Spirit. But these are only deviations. The flesh, such as God has conceived and wished it, is an instrument of salvation. So it is that God is the cause of the love of a man and a woman and has made of the sacred union of marriage a sacrament. And so it is again that God has given us the duty of taking care of our body, of preserving our health, of praying for the sick. And God has exalted our flesh to such a dignity that He has wished himself to become flesh in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is why the Liturgy can, even in the same prayer before the reading of the Gospel, call on us to "trample down" the desires of the flesh (those of these desires which are bad and which separate us from God and our brothers) and speak of the "illumination of our bodies" as well as that of our souls.

Since we are going to hear the reading of the Word of God, let us ask, with the prologue of the gospel according to St. John, that this Word might "become flesh" in us, "abide in us" and fill us to such a point that our body becomes the place where that Word can be seen.

Let us Hear the Holy Gospel

"Wisdom. Let us attend. Let us hear the holy Gospel.

The deacon or priest now says.

Let us note that it is not simply a matter of listening to the Gospel. It is a matter of "hearing" it, of making ourselves attentive to the Word of God, of opening to it not only our ears, but also our heart.

The word "Gospel" means literally "the good news." The words of the Liturgy "Let us hear the holy Gospel" thus mean; "Let us hear the holy and good news." For every passage of the Gospel contains a good news, a joyful message, the announcement of something very great and which concerns each of us. Perhaps the Gospel, at first sight, does not seem to us at this moment to be "the good news." Perhaps, as we listen to the passage which is going to be read, we say to ourselves: "I've heard this so many times already! This reading contains nothing that touches me."

But every portion of the Gospel, whatever it might be, even if we have already heard it so often before, always has something new to tell us. If I hear this Gospel with humility and fervor, I am going to discover in it each time a phrase, a word, which I have never noticed until now and which is going to strike me as if I were hearing it for the very first time. And this message has not been addressed to the audience in general. It is addressed to each listener personally. It has been addressed to me personally. In hearing the reading of the Gospel I ought to think: "Here is that word which the Lord has kept in reserve for me until today. Here is what He wanted to say to me today. Here is what He has just told me. I will keep this word in my heart as something extremely precious."

The Great Entrance

Now we are going to bring to the Holy Table the bread and the wine which have been prepared and left on the small altar located on the left side of the sanctuary. This solemn procession to bring the bread and wine is called the "Great Entrance." It is distinguished from the "Little Entrance" which we have already spoken about and during which it was the Gospels that were carried.

During this procession the choir sings: "We who in a mystery represent the cherubim and sing to the life-giving Trinity the Thrice Holy Hymn, let us now put aside all earthly cares." The words of the Little Entrance greeted the entrance of the Angels along with our entrance. In the Great Entrance we do even more. We declare that mystically, by God's grace, we have become the figures, the representatives of the angels. We identify ourselves with them in a certain way. This is why, at this moment which changes us, we must put aside every earthly care, put off from us everything that does not look towards God.

And yet we must not, we cannot forget or neglect the petitions of our brothers and sisters. So, before we pass through the main doors of the iconostasis and go to the Holy Table, the ministers of the Liturgy remember the pastors of the Church, the country and city to which we belong and every other special intention which is necessary and ought to be mentioned. Then the bread and wine are placed on the Holy Table and incensed, and the choir sings: "So that we may receive the King of all who comes invisibly escorted by the armies of the Angels."

A Community of Love and a Community of Faith

The Great Entrance is followed by a rather long series and list of litany petitions. The Liturgy now moves on to the solemn act of the confession of our faith. As a prelude to this confession, the priest or the deacon addresses a supreme call to the faithful to love: "Let us love one another so that with one mind we may confess ..."

And the choir continues: "... the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in essence and undivided, i.e., all Three of the same nature and indivisible."

This moment has a very important significance. For these words which have just been said express the very nature of the Church. It is in a common love and by a common love that the Church proclaims its faith in the supreme community of love, that love which is the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Church is a community of love. This community of love declares itself to be a community of faith. Those who refuse to love cannot confess the love of the Three Divine Persons in God worthily. I cannot say "I believe in Love" unless, at this very moment, I have included in this love of God, in my love, all men and all women, the entire universe.

The Doors

The confession of our faith is just about to be read. But before that the priest or deacon says these words: "the doors! The doors! In wisdom let us attend!" What do these words mean?

In the very early days of the Church, the catechumens who were candidates for baptism and repentant sinners who were doing public penance were not allowed to take part in this second part of the Liturgy, in other words in the Eucharist strictly speaking. They were invited to leave the gathering. Then the doors of the church were closed. The only ones allowed to remain were the faithful whose personal life was in order and who were active members of the local Church.

Today we do not close the doors of the building in the material sense. Catechumens, sinners and even unbelievers are allowed to be present for all the Liturgy. Does that mean that this proclamation to close the doors has no more sense today?

Not at all. In our heart there are invisible doors which we must spiritually, if not materially, close when the Holy Mysteries are being celebrated. At this moment we must banish from ourselves the distractions, the preoccupations, the thoughts, those desires that are contrary or merely foreign to God.

And, on the other hand, there are doors in our heart which have to open in an invisible way. "Let us be attentive!" says the text of the Holy Liturgy. Let us become open and attentive to those words and inspirations which come from God. The Lord addresses to each of us the word which He once said over the deaf man; "Ephpheta! Be open!"

Under the Breath of the Holy Spirit

The reader of all the assembly of the faithful now begin to sing or say the Creed, the confession of our faith. As long as the Creed is being sung, the priest shakes the large veil which covered the Holy Gifts over the bread and wine intended for Communion.

This act, a bit strange at first sight, has, as in many other rites, an origin connected with something quite practical. Later this act was given a deep spiritual meaning. The waving of the veil over the bread and wine is considered as the symbol of the breathing of the Holy Spirit, of that mighty wind which filled the house on the day of Pentecost. We are saying the words of our confession of faith. We cannot confess the Christian faith as it ought to be confessed unless at the same moment the Holy Spirit breathes on us. Without His presence and inspiration, we can certainly read all the correct formulas, but the action will be dead, sterile. So, may the Holy Spirit come to give life and soul to the words which we are saying!

Do You Believe This?

The Creed, the confession of the Christian faith such as it has been established by the Ecumenical Councils of Nicea and Constantinople, is not read or sung.

It begins with this word: "I believe." What does it mean to believe? It is not a question of a purely mental attachment to certain doctrines. It is a matter of the authentic act of real faith done under the influence of God's grace, which has to deal with truths God has revealed and which are inaccessible to human reason alone and expressed by us in an attitude of confidence and absolute obedience. One can have correct beliefs and still lack this inner attitude which is the real faith that saves.

In what do we believe? We repeat the "articles of faith" and the old words of the 4th century, and we can still derive new strengths from these ancient sources. But our belief, far from being a dry list of abstract "notions," must, in each of the Creed's articles, be a movement of our soul, a bound towards God, an appeal.

We believe in God the creator. We adore His intentions with regard to the universe He created, to all the elements of this universe, and to the future restoration in Christ of a world which man's fall has made captive; and we will not attribute to our God any of the evils which He fights with us and which are due to the revolt of a power who has become the power of darkness.

We believe in Jesus Christ, the unique and eternal Son of the Father, of the same nature as the Father. In Him and by Him we wish to become the adopted sons and daughters of the Father.

We wish to adore Him and love Him not only in His divine nature, but in the human nature which He assumed from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. We wish to become participants in the Redemption accomplished on the cross, by the resurrection and the Ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus. We aspire with fervor to His return and His reign.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father. We wish to seek the light in the written and oral Revelation which the spirit has inspired and in His action among us which is always present.

We believe in the universal Church which has come from the Apostles. We unite ourselves to all its members, not only to its visible members, but also to its invisible members, to all souls of good will who without knowing how to name Him implicitly ask of Christ and receive from Him all that is true, good and beautiful in them.

Thanksgiving

We now enter into the central prayer of the Liturgy, into the great act of thanksgiving and of offering of which the consecration of the bread and wine are part. This is the "Eucharist" in the strict sense of the word, for "eucharist" means "thanksgiving."

"It is meet and right to sing to You, to bless You, to praise You ..." He who sings, blesses and praises with a sincere heart puts himself into an attitude of thanksgiving. He is in a state of soul which we could call "eucharistic." He progresses in life in singing, with joy and confidence. He is established in a happiness which envelopes him and surpasses him.

For what do we thank God in this great prayer of thanksgiving? We express to God our gratitude "for everything." We remember before Him everything He has done for our sake. "From nothingness You have called us into being." He has lifted men up after their fall. He has never stopped acting for us until He has brought us back and given us His Kingdom which is to come. We give thanks "for all the benefits known or unknown," for all this goodness poured out on us every day in an infinite variety of forms.

But our thanksgiving becomes more specific, it becomes more direct and more concrete; "We thank You also for this Liturgy which you have accepted from our hands, even though You are surrounded by thousands of Archangels . . ." An adoration much greater than our own could be offered to God by the heavenly powers alone. But God accepts that which we present to Him with our sinful hands.

The Angels at this moment join with us to sing the hymn of victory: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord," the Lord of Angelic armies (sabbath). Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"

He who comes in the name of the Lord . . . It is a matter of Him who comes to us at this solemn minute, of Him who is the supreme gift which the Father makes to men. "You have so loved the world that You gave Your only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life . . ." All the existence of God, all of human existence, is a mystery of love. Here we are at this very moment before the Love which gives itself.

The Liturgy now goes on to make clearer, through the lips of the priest, the visible form by which the Gift of love was made manifest to us. The words of the Savior are going to be repeated, the same words which He spoke "on the night when He was handed over or rather when He handed Himself over for the life of the world." Let us hear these words once again: "Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you for the remission of sins . . . All of you drink of this, this is my blood, the blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins."

Each of these words should be weighed in our heart. "Take:" this is quite different from "receive." It is a matter of that sacred daring which draws near and which even with sinful hands "takes." What are we taking? "My body . . . my blood . . ." These words are spirit and life we will not hear them in the sense of a sort of sacramental materialism. Nor will we see there only a purely symbolical _ expression, a metaphor, a simple sign. We will accept them as the efficacious declaration of a Presence that is invisible but totally real, living and active, of the Body and Blood of the Savior. This bread is a Body that is "broken;" this wine is a Blood that is "shed." Our Liturgy, just like the Last Supper, is an invitation to participate in our own measure in the immolation of the Body of the Lord and in the shedding of His Blood. We have been called to give ourselves, to let ourselves be broken, to let ourselves be distributed. For the Eucharist is a mystery of love and we know from the Gospel that there is no greater love than to give one's life for those whom one loves.

"For you . . ." The Body of the Lord is broken for me. The Blood of the Lord is shed for me. Let us not make Christ's declaration merely a general statement. We must learn to see how personal it is, how it concerns each of us in particular. At this very moment, the Savior tells me that He has died for me, that He is the real Paschal Lamb who takes upon Himself all my sins. Did I really feel the power and dimensions of the divine pardon, do I feel myself purified and covered by the Blood of the Redeemer?

Offering

The Lord offers us His Body and His Blood. In return, what can we offer Him? We can offer Him all that is in our power to give, everything that we possess, and first of all ourselves. We can "give back to Him" everything that He has done for us, i.e., we can recognize His benefits, adore in each of them His goodness. This is why the priest, having rapidly spoken of all the history of salvation of men, the cross and the grave, the resurrection and the Ascension, and the glorious Coming again, lifts up the bread and wine to God as he says; "Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee on behalf of all and for all."

Let us stop at these words for a moment. "Thine own of Thine own . . ." There is nothing which belongs to us. There is nothing which we have not received from God. We can only offer Him that which He himself has given us. We ask Him to take it once again, to consecrate for Himself and for us all that He has made ours. And first of all this bread and this wine, these elements which represent all the creation and which are going to become the visible instruments of our communion with God. Then we ought to remember here all those whose work has produced this bread and wine; the sower of the wheat, the worker, the baker, the vineyard worker, the worker to whom the vessels of metal are due. All the universe and all human work are summed up in these humble elements of the world through which God Himself comes to us. At this moment the divine work of the creation reaches its goal and its culminating point. And at this moment we pray for all the creation, we consecrate back to God all men and the entire world, we accomplish the office of priest whether be it the ministerial priesthood delegated by the Church or the "royal priesthood" which Holy Scripture attributes to all believers. In supplication and intercession we lift up to God all things and all men, all human needs, all human pains and distresses. And my soul and my body which belong to You, which come from You, Lord, I offer them to You, I return them to You now that they have become Yours by grace and prayer: "Thine own of Thine own . . ."

Pentecost

The priest now calls the Spirit of God down upon the "Holy Gifts."

". . . We call on You, we pray You, we make our prayer to You; send down Your Holy Spirit on us and on these Gifts placed here. And make this bread to be the precious body of Your Christ, and make that which is in this cup to be the precious blood of Your Christ, changing them by Your Holy Spirit, so that they may become for those who participate in them the cleansing of soul, the remission of sins, communion in and with Your Holy Spirit, the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven . . ."

Here we come to yet another aspect of the Holy Liturgy. The Liturgy is not only the gathering of believers around the Word of God. It is not only the gathering of believers around the Lord's Supper. It is also a gathering of Pentecost, it is a Pentecost. It is a coming, a descent of the Holy Spirit, among us and upon us.

This Pentecostal character of the Divine Liturgy is shown by many other prayers in the text of the Liturgy. Before actually beginning the Liturgy, the priest asked for the presence of the Holy Spirit: "O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, You who are present everywhere and who fill all things, treasury of graces and giver of life, come to us and dwell within us . . ." The Holy Spirit, who "is good and gives life" has been called upon many times along with the Father and the Son. After the Great Entrance, the priest asked: ". . . may the Spirit of Your grace descend in Your goodness on these gifts which we offer and on all Your people." The priest has also asked that with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father, the "communion of the Holy Spirit" might be with us all. He has told the deacon that it is the spirit himself "who will concelebrate along with us." This appeal to the Holy Spirit now becomes more pressing: "We call on You, we pray to You, we implore You, send your Holy Spirit . . ."

Where is the Holy Spirit going to be sent? ". . . On the gifts which we have offered here." The change of the bread and the wine into Christ's Body and Blood is not a work of priestly magic. The text of the Liturgy says clearly: "changing them by Your Holy Spirit." This change is God's answer to our request and prayer, but it is not an end in itself. It is done "so that they may become for those who receive them a purification of soul, remission of sins," and also "communion in and with Your Holy Spirit." Everything is done by the Spirit and in the spirit.

And here is a remark that is very important. The priest has said: "Send down Your Holy Spirit on us and on these Gifts . . ." He has not asked that the spirit come first on the Gifts but that He come first of all on us. Here is the moment of Pentecost in the eucharistic liturgy. The Holy Spirit comes into our hearts before coming upon the material elements of bread and wine which are the objects of our offering and of God's consecration. Do we feel all the power and importance of this inner and immaterial Pentecost? Do we realize that at this moment the presence and power of the Holy Spirit have been given us? Even those who are not going to receive communion sacramentally can, if they turn to God with all their heart, still receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Certain barriers, certain things can stop us perhaps today from access to the sacrament, but the Holy Spirit breathes wherever He wants and no frontier or limit can limit the Love without limits.

The Spirit, even in the course of the eucharistic liturgy, is not given only in view of the Eucharist alone. It is a matter of our introduction into the life of Pentecost, into the life of the Holy Spirit. Have we ever taken seriously the promises which the Lord Jesus after His resurrection made not only to His apostles, but also to all who believe in Him? Have we ever believed that in Jesus' name we can cast out demons and heal the sick? The Lord Jesus said we could. It is a sad lack of confidence not to dare to exercise (with faith, humility and obedience to God's will) the powers with which Christ has empowered His people. No doubt this holy daring implies on our part an effort to be totally renewed, our entrance into a transfigured life of renunciation, of joy and love. But, when the church calls for the descent of the Holy Spirit on us, is the Spirit to be given in vain? Have the promises of the Gospel been made in vain by our Lord and Savior?

Blessed are you Among Women

The priest in his prayer is now going to mention those men and those women in whom Pentecost was visibly manifested, in other words the Saints who make up the glorified Church, the heavenly Church. The icons remind us that they are present along with us and take part with us in our adoration. At the time of the "little Entrance" we asked what the Angels and Saints enter the sanctuary along with us. This commemoration of the Saints now becomes more concrete. The priest mentions the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, the apostles, evangelists, martyrs, those persecuted for the Christian faith, monks and nuns and the just who have died in the faith, "and above all, our all pure, all holy, our glorious lady, the Mother of God and ever virgin Mary."

The choir responds by singing that she is "blessed among all, more honored than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim" because she "has given birth to God the word while forever remaining Virgin."

We have many other reasons to glorify Mary other than the unique privilege which God gave her. She was the humble servant of the Lord, one who asked simply that it be done to her according to the word of the Angel at her Annunciation. She has heard and kept in her heart the words of her Son. And she surrounds us with a tenderness that is silent, attentative, compassionate and interceding. A confident and loving intimacy with Mary introduces into our life refreshment, calm and hope.

And All Mankind

"And remember, O Lord . . ." continues the priest's prayer. He mentions once again those who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection. Then he prays for those to whom God has entrusted an authority over people.

He prays for those who are the shepherds of souls and leaders of the church. He mentions by name the bishop of the local Church, asking that he may "correctly distribute the word of Your truth." Note these words well. This is what we ask first of all for our bishops and priests. Finally the priest entrusts to the Lord those who travel, the sick, prisoners and all men. Let us think here at this moment in the Liturgy of the sum total of all human suffering and of the sufferings of individuals. The priest entrusts to God "those who bear fruit" and "those who think of the poor." This is the moment to remind ourselves that we own nothing, that we are only the stewards of the good things of God, that we are to share them with those who are in need, and that an offering that costs nothing has no value. What am I going to give to the collection which is now going to take place?

The priest concludes: "And remember all those whom each of us remembers, and remember all mankind." And the choir repeats; "and all mankind." Let us see well what these few words entail on our part. They express the universality of the church's prayer and of our own personal prayer. We exclude absolutely no one from our prayer. We open our arms, we extend them towards all the needs and all sufferings of men. We belong to you all, we unite ourselves with you.

The Lord's Prayer

Our great prayer of intercession continues. Among the requests we make to God, let us note the one where we ask the presence of "an angel of peace, a faithful guide, a guardian of our souls and bodies." Have we ever explored all the riches of this presence of a guardian angel to whom God has especially entrusted us? Has our angel really become for us an intimate friend, a beloved traveling companion in life? What place do we give him in our life?

And now our long prayer ends with the prayer par excellence, with that prayer which we received from no merely human authority, but which the Lord Jesus himself taught us and which for this reason ought to have the central place in all our prayers. A few words on this text will perhaps help us to say it as it ought to be said, in spirit and in truth.

"Our Father . . ." To this Father we can say "my Father," but we must also add "our Father" for He is the loving Father of all men and women.

"Father . . ." The Lord Jesus is by nature the only real Son of the Father in a sense that is totally and unique and exceptional. We can become sons of God by adoption, by grace.

"Who art in heaven." We are not obliged to believe in a heaven that is material or physically localized. Heaven is essentially a state of soul, a state of vision, of love and of union. The word "heaven" reminds us what distance exists between the Creator and His creatures. This distance by its very nature cannot be bridged, but our God by grace has become man and has lived among us and in Him we live, we move and have our being.

"Hallowed be Your name." It is not a question of singing God's praises without end, but of putting the name of God aside as being above all other names, as being the bearer of a reality that is above all realities and of acting in such a way that our life is a living testimony to the excellence of our Father.

"Your Kingdom come." The Kingdom of God can manifest itself by certain external things, certain structures, certain institutions, certain laws or certain rites. But this Kingdom, says the gospel is first of all within us. It is an inner event. It is the total gift of our soul to God.

"May Your will be done . . ." The coming of God's Kingdom becomes clearer in our own doing of God's will in the big things and in the so called little things. But there are no "little" things before God. The smallest details of our daily life become great by our obedience to God's will for us.

"On earth as it is in heaven." The perfect obedience of the angels is the model for our obedience. Our obedience must be a love without limits towards God and towards men.

"Give us this day our daily bread." This prayer has taken on different forms which are somewhat different. All of them are correct. The bread which we ask is the earthly food we need for our daily life, the inner and invisible food that is the Word of God in our soul, participation in the body and Blood of the Lord Jesus offered and sacrificed, the banquet of the heavenly Kingdom of which today's bread is the pledge and anticipation.

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This is not a sort of tit for tat that we address to God, a comparison on an equal footing between God's forgiveness and the forgiveness which we give: Pardon us because we also pardon. The words imply rather the idea that we have already made our own a condition necessary if our own sins are to be forgiven. In forgiving we take away an obstacle which stops us from being forgiven. In other words, our refusal to forgive others. When we do so God's forgiveness can wipe out our own sins and weaknesses.

"And put us not to the test." This is a better translation of the Gospel's words "lead us not into temptation" or "let us not fall to temptation." We must not boast about our resistance to temptations. Rather we should humbly ask God to take temptations away from us and not put our great weakness to the test.

"But deliver us from evil." God does not wish evil either physical or moral evil, to anyone. He is a God who is Savior, a God who is Redeemer, a God who is Love. He fights with us against the evil introduced into our world by revolt and by sin. He leaves His creatures the freedom to say "yes" or "no." In His fight against our common enemy this God (whom we could call a suffering God in a certain sense) can seem to be wounded and even killed in certain souls, but we believe firmly that love and resurrection will be stronger than death.

The Lord's Supper

We now come to that part of the Liturgy which has a direct relation to the eucharistic meal.

The priest first of all asks for the sanctifying coming of Christ: "Come to sanctify us, You who sit with the Father and yet are invisibly present here with us. Grant by Your mighty hand to distribute to us Your immaculate body and Your precious blood, and by us to all your people."

These words call our attention to two important aspects of the Liturgy. We ask Christ that His Body and His Blood be given us "from His hands." We believe that we are receiving Christ by communion. But we must become capable, with the eyes of faith and of love, of seeing the Lord Jesus coming himself to us individually and, as He did with His disciples, of presenting the "Holy Gifts" through which He gives Himself, to us personally. It is not the priest who gives us communion; beyond the priest it is the Lord who both offers and is offered and who approaches each one of us personally. Do we see Christ coming to us? Do we see Him extending to us the Bread and the Wine which have become Him? Do we hear that secret and individual word which He is going to speak to us at this moment and which must guide all our life?

We pray that "by us" the Body and precious Blood of Christ be given "to all the people." It is not only the priest who in carrying out his ministry is going to make other men sharers in the Lord's Supper. All those who are receiving communion today must "distribute," must give that which they have received to others. This means that by their behavior, by their word which is not "preachy," but loving and which renders a discrete witness to Christ, they must make the grace which has come on them shine on others. And here it's not only a matter of those who have taken part in the sacrament this morning materially.

Even those who have not gone to communion physically have been spiritually united to the Eucharist, have in a special way been nourished with Christ's Body and Blood, and have opened themselves to the Holy Spirit. They also must communicate to others, in their daily life, by their example, the Gift that is the Savior. We are all entrusted with passing on this Gift "to all the people," in a gift that has no limits.

Now the priest is going to break the holy Bread as he says: "The Lamb of God is broken and distributed, He is broken without being divided, He is always eaten and never consumed . . ." Let us pause for a moment at these words. That in which we are going to share is a bread that has been broken, i.e., the Body of the Savior broken in His Passion. That which we are about to drink is a wine poured out, the Blood of the Lord shed on the Cross. We do not renew the sacrifice of Golgotha physically, but we participate in this sacrifice. Every eucharistic communion is an immolation of the one who receives communion. The communicant lets himself be penetrated by a sword of fire. He dies to himself and is born again as a changed man. This sacrificial aspect of the Lord's Supper must find a practical _expression in life; what am I going to sacrifice to the Savior today in order to unite myself with His sacrifice? How am I going to kill for Him that which must be killed in me? In what form will I accomplish this sacrifice which every communion implies?

Just like the Lamb of God, with the Lamb of God, I must be "broken" and "always eaten," in giving myself to others, in sacrificing myself for others, in becoming the man for others. Lord Jesus, I put myself in Your hands in order to be broken, shared and distributed by Your hands.

The priest pours a little hot water into the cup, signifying the "warmth of the faith, full of the Holy Spirit." Once again Pentecost is associated with Pascha. Then, the priest communicates and invites the people to come and receive the Holy Gifts. Various prayers have been added here to the Liturgy. "I believe, O Lord, and I confess . . ." They are all valuable, but to fully understand what this action which we are doing really means, we have only to pay attention to the words which the priest says to each communicant; "The servant of God receives the precious Body and Blood of the Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and for life everlasting."

This prayer contains five basic things. It is a servant of God called by his or her own proper name who approaches. Am I really this servant? Do I really hear this personal call made to me in my own name? I am going to "receive" the Holy Gifts. They are Gifts, the manifestation of God's pure grace to which I have no right or claim and which the Love without limits offers me personally in His generosity which nothing can exhaust.

What has been given me is the body and Blood of the Lord Jesus. Beyond the physical signs of bread and wine, there is the reality, the presence of my Savior and His redeeming action. I am participating in the offering and sacrifice He made on Golgotha. The Holy Gifts which I receive are the _expression of the forgiveness of my sins which the sacrificed Lamb has taken from me and put on Himself. I have been made clean by His blood, washed and plunged into His blood, like the portions of bread which the priest has put into the cup. And this Gift is my pledge of life eternal, for the immolated Lamb in which I share is also the Lamb risen on the third day. Pascha includes the Resurrection just as it does the crucifixion of the Savior. I am a participant in the Resurrection.

We Have Seen the True Light

The Liturgy ends in an atmosphere of thanks, of joy, and one could also say of exaltation in God. Let us examine our conscience and see if these words express for us an experience that is personal, living, genuine or whether they remain merely the dead words of a cold ritual formula.

"Having received the divine mysteries of Christ . . ." says the deacon or priest. Have we really received them? How have we received them? Perhaps we have gone to Holy Communion. Have we really participated in the mystery of Christ in spirit and in truth? And if we have not been able to go to Holy Communion, does that mean that we can and ought to go home empty-handed, without having made the effort to "receive" a divine reality? What have we "received" at this liturgy? Even he who has not been able to receive Communion ought during the Liturgy to have been touched by the breath of the Spirit, by a touch of grace coming from Christ, by some sort of inspiration that purifies and changes us. Whether we have shared in the Holy Eucharistic Gifts or not, we must leave the Church different than we were when we entered it.

The choir has sung; "We have seen the true light! We have received the heavenly Spirit! We have found the true faith!" And the priest has said: "Having seen the resurrection of Christ . . ." Has this Liturgy really been for us a contact with Christ not only offered in sacrifice but also risen from the dead? In this Liturgy have we really seen Him who is the Light of the world? Has this Liturgy really been for us a Pentecost in which not only the person of the Savior but also His Spirit powerful and active have been given to us? During this Liturgy have we really discovered the true faith, faith in a divine Love so great that it sacrificed its life for the life of the world, for me, for those whom Love has loved? If the answer is no, this Liturgy has been for us only a gesture, an empty word, instead of being an inner and decisive event in our life.

In the final prayer read by the priest in the middle of the church, the priest speaks of those who "put their trust in You." Trust whatever may be our weakness, whatever may be the dangers that are around us. The Liturgy ought to put us into a state of trust. "And forsake us not who have put our hope in You . . ."

The priest continues; "Preserve the fullness of Your Church . . . Sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house . . . Glorify them in return . . ." Here, let us pause again. Fullness of the Church, beauty of the house of God, glorification of those who love this beauty. Here are great and beautiful words, but we would be terribly wrong if we were thinking of a Church that is earthly, humanly triumphant, powerful, "respected," "fourth major faith" etc. St. John Chrysostom speaks of those who bring to the altar of stone precious offerings but who remain unmoved by the living altar they meet on every street. In other words by the poor, needy. Can we speak of the beauty of the house of God as long as it is possible for a man to participate in the Eucharist and once he has left the building to die of hunger outside? Can we speak of the fullness of the church as long as it is possible for someone to attend the gathering of the faithful and no one even notices him or tries to enter into a personal contact with him? What beauty are we really talking about? Where is that fullness of the church?

The last word of the text of the Liturgy shows marvelously the divine reality which the liturgical signs express under a veil. The priest asks Christ our God to have mercy on us and save us and he ends this way: "For He is good and loves mankind." The Holy Liturgy brings us into the presence of the supreme Goodness, the Love without limits.