

THE DIVINE LITURGY A COMPANY WITH HEAVEN

Blessed Father Bishoi Kamel

While the Apostle John the beloved was exiled on the island of Patmos, and was deprived of the Sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy, the heavens opened for him and he attended the heavenly liturgy, with an altar having the souls of martyrs under it, a living Sacrifice (Lamb as though slain), angelic priesthood, angels, and incense which is the prayers of the saints. Thus we become aware of this great mystery that the Sacrifice of the Liturgy is a heavenly sacrifice. There is only one sacrifice - that of the Liturgy, which takes us up to heaven or opens the heavens so we live there, penetrating the boundaries of place and time, conquering and breaking away those fetters and uniting us with eternity. The Divine Liturgy makes the mystery of Incarnation with its Crucifixion, Resurrection and Parousia present with us at all times in spite of the succession of events. The Incorporeal took flesh, and He who is beyond time came under time! St. Augustine says, "When God saw man longing for heaven, He gave him His Body and Blood on earth so he lives by them as though in heaven." "When we stand in Thy Holy Temple, we are counted as those standing in heaven."

What similarity is there between the perfection of heaven and the contemptibility of man? Only there in Your heart on the Cross, O my dear Lord, Jesus Christ, lies the relationship between these two entirely different things. Heaven and man meet here on the altar, where You are present, my God. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son", and He gave Him to us.³

Serious Moments

The Liturgy is the greatest act that can take place in our lives. It is the presence of the Infinite in our midst, to Whom the angels bow down and at Whose name the devils shake and shiver. The candles and rituals used in it are like the robes and vestments in a royal court. The words in the Liturgy are not merely intercessions but rather they are tools and means of something greater. They are tools in the hands of the Holy Spirit used to sanctify the offering. All the words and acts of those around the altar pass quickly, and before the altar all watch for the great event. They are not

awaiting the angel to move the waters, but are awaiting the Holy Spirit to perform the greatest of miracles, to touch the bread and wine and change them into the Body and Blood of the Lord.

We are all in our places with our hearts and prayers, without any effort or exertion, but like the musicians in a band who, in spite of the different instruments they play, are all in agreement about playing one soft melody, the melody of the slain and living Christ, the melody of love and sacrifice, the melody of forgiveness by the Blood that was shed, the melody of everlasting life.

The altar is filled with hosts of angels and saints, and in front of the altar is that great number of sick, lame, and paralyzed, all hoping to be healed. They are not lying before the pool of Bethzatha, but before the altar of the Lord of hosts, before the holy and heavenly altar. They are not expecting an angel, but the Creator of the angels. All are waiting to be healed, he who is sick with the lusts of the flesh like Mary Magdalen, he who is impulsive and who denies Christ like Peter, he who is sick with fear like Nicodemus who came to Christ by night, he who is sick with love of wealth like Zacchaeus, the murderer and thief like the thief on Calvary, and countless numbers who do not cease moaning and suffering; through the Sacrifice all expect healing, salvation and everlasting life.

The Church is a hospital for diseases of the body, soul and spirit as is said in the litany of the sick,

“Extend, O Lord, Thy mercy and compassion to them and heal them.

Take away, O Lord, from them and from us too all traces of sickness and infirmity.

Those who are still sick, O Lord, grant them recovery.

Those who are afflicted by evil spirits, O Lord, do Thou release them.

Those who are in prison, dungeon, exile or captivity, O Lord, do Thou set them free and have mercy upon them.

For Thou untiest the manacled and upliftest the fallen ...

Thou the eternal and true Physician of our souls and bodies, the Prelate of all flesh, accord us Thy salvation.”⁴

“The Divine Liturgy is thus a hospital,” as St. John Chrysostom says, “where God does not ask for punishment of the sinners but for their forgiveness”.

Participation of the Angels in the Service of the Liturgy

In the beginning of the Liturgy of the Faithful, the deacon says, “Lift up your eyes towards the East to see the Body and Blood of Emmanuel our Lord on the altar, the angels and archangels stand there covering their faces before the brightness of the majesty of His glory.” The priest starts by proclaiming the presence of the angels in their nine ranks who come to join in prayers, “Before Whom stand the Angels, the

Archangels, the heads, the dominions, the thrones, the dignitaries, the powers, ... the Cherubim ... and the Seraphim.”⁵

St. Theodore says, “The two deacons on either side of the altar are symbolic of the two angels standing by the tomb at the time of the Resurrection because the altar stands for the tomb where the Sacrifice was laid.” Also the presence of a deacon by the Sacrifice symbolizes the presence of the angel who tended to the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane during His suffering as a sacrifice because the Sacrifice of the Liturgy is itself the Sacrifice of the suffering of the Lord.

At the end of the Liturgy, the priest asks the angel of the Sacrifice, as he ascends up to the Lord with our praises, to remember us with the Lord just as the angel took up to heaven the prayers of Cornelius. (Acts 10:4)

Our Union with the Angels in Praise

Glory be to our Lord Who by His Incarnation and Sacrifice on the Cross reconciled the heavenly with the earthly and made them one.

The angels do not cease night or day saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, ...” (Rev. 4:8; Isaiah 6:3), and we sing their song in the Liturgy, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Hosts.”

In this regard St. Cyril of Jerusalem says, “... We recite this divine praise which we have received from the Seraphim (Isaiah 6:3) so we can share in the same praise of blessing with these heavenly hosts.”

St. John Chrysostom says, “... All the heavenly powers come and sing this song and the area around the altar is filled with the angels that gather to honor the Sacrifice ... All the angels share intercession with the priest ... The spiritual fire of the Holy Spirit descends from heaven, and blood gushes from the side of the pure Lamb into the chalice to purify our souls ... So with what right do you dare O Christian to attend the offering of this Sacrifice without reverence? ... The Church is heaven itself!” He also says, “The time of the Sacrifice is the most appropriate time to ask God. The angels seize this happy occasion to ask for us various graces and to intercede on our behalf with greater fervor.”

During the Liturgy, the angels stand among us. “Thou hast strengthened the chorus of the incorporeal among the people,” says the Gregorian Liturgy ... We also sing their song, “Thou hast given those on earth the praises of the Seraphim.”

The Church has called the saints earthly angels or heavenly men. The Coptic artist used to picture some of the saints with six wings like the Seraphim to express the angelic nature of the saint. (The icon of St. Tacla Haimonot is a typical example.)

When we stand for the morning prayer we say, “Let us sing with the angels saying: Glory be to God in the highest, on earth peace, goodwill towards men.”⁶

Service of the Angels for us During the Liturgy

St. John the Short, used to see the angels during the Liturgy. He saw the devils surrounding the people to prevent them from entering the church, while an angel

carrying a sword helped them by the hand to attend. The angels help the faithful because they rejoice when one sinner repents. They offer the prayers and the offerings up to heaven as the priest says in the prayer of the oblation, "May it have access to Thy Grandeur through the ministry of Thy blessed Angels and Archangels."⁷

Out of their love for us 'they sing the song of our victory and salvation with a voice full of glory,' as the Gregorian Liturgy says. This is explained in the book of Revelation when the twenty-four priests sing saying, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll, and to open its seals, for thou wast slain, and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God," (Rev. 5:9,10)

How to Stand with the Angels

1. As the liturgy of the faithful starts with the presence of the angels, the priest proclaims the presence of the Lord saying, "The Lord be with you all," and later cries, "Lift your hearts". The people respond, "They are with the Lord." The angels cover their faces out of holy fear and our hearts should remain in all reverence with the Lord; the Divine Liturgy is like standing before the Lord. During the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Trinity is present together with the Royal Court members (the angels and the saints). That is why the priest who neglects offering the Liturgy actually deprives himself and the Church of honoring and glorifying the Holy Trinity. He also deprives the angels of the joy of attending, the sinners of forgiveness, the faithful of help and the dead of mercy.

2. The praises of the angels revolve around the word "Holy". Without holiness we shall never behold the Lord, and without it we cannot participate in the Sacrifice of the Liturgy. God is Holy and we should also be holy. So with what tears and contrition ought we to ask for holiness and struggle for its sake even unto death? The Divine Liturgy is a gathering of the sanctified people and the holy angels in the presence of the Holy One, because "The Holies are for the holy." The Liturgy of St. Cyril says,

"As you purified the lips of Thy servant the prophet Isaiah when the Seraphim took a burning coal with tongs from the altar, put it in his mouth, and said: Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven, so also we, Thy weak and sinful servants, do implore Thy mercy; purify our souls, our bodies, our lips, and our hearts and grant us this burning coal that gives life to the spirit, the body and the soul, which is the Holy Body and Honored Blood of Thy Christ."

3. The angels are humble and the devils are haughty. The angels cover their faces and glorify in fear and reverence. This is why he who wishes to attend the Divine Liturgy with the angels, should listen to the words of the deacon, "Stand up in fear of the Lord", and, "Bow your heads before the Lord."

“Thus humility and the feeling of need, together with a contrite heart, similar to the publican who stood with a bowed head are a requirement for attending the Liturgy.”⁸

The deacons and choir should not sing with pride or loud voices, but rather with soft angelic voices and with reverence, as the Didascalia says.

Translated by Lily Soliman

References

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3. Charles de Foucauld
4. F.M. Ishak: *A Complete Translation of the Coptic Orthodox Mass and the Liturgy of St. Basil*. Toronto, Ontario, 1973; p. 31
5. *Ibid.*; p. 89
6. *The Agpeya*: Op. Cit.
7. F. M. Ishak: Op. Cit.; p. 33
8. From an article by Father Matta El-Meskeen, “Bow your heads”, in *St. Mark Monthly Review*.