

THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE EUCHARIST

EUCHARIST A TRINITARIAN ACTION

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- “*And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.*” (Matt. 28: 20)
- “*Surely I am coming soon.*” Amen. *Come, Lord Jesus!*” (Rev.. 22: 20)

The Holy Trinity and the Eucharist

The phrase ‘Presence of God in the Eucharist’ is usually taken to express the real presence of the Second Person of the Trinity with his humanity in the Sacrament. Eucharist is the Sacrifice of Christ. It is his heavenly marriage feast (Rev. 19:9) in which the Church (with all her members) comes out of his side (Gen. 2: 21- 23; John 19: 34) and unites with him to become one body (John 6: 56, Epées. 5: 29: 30) in which the unity of all her members is attained (1 Cor. 10: 17). However, one should not ignore the fact that the Eucharist is an essential part of Gods economy for salvation. Although this is centered in the role of the Son, and is sometimes called ‘the economy of the Son’, yet the Son is one hypostasis of the Triune God. The Father and the Holy Spirit have their roles in all the stages of salvation from the beginning, even before the creation and the fall (Ephes.1; 5) till the end of time when God “may be everything to every one” (1 Cor. 15: 28).

Without the action of the Father and the Holy Spirit there can be no Eucharist. There is no presence of the Son or communion with him, without the presence and communion of the Father and the Spirit. The Eucharistic Liturgy itself, like any other act of Christian worship is a trinitarian service that is always offered to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.

The Church, in union with Christ her Head, addresses God the Father in the Eucharist when she offers her thanksgiving and glorification. In the midst of the congregation Christ praises the Father (Heb. 2: 12). In the anamnesis of his work for our salvation, the Church sacramentally follows her forerunner (Heb. 6: 20) to the abode of the Heavenly Father (John 14: 1-3, 7, 9-10, 23), where we “will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3: 4).

It is the Father who receives and accepts the sacrifice of Christ that He offers in union with the Church. The sign of his acceptance of the offering is his sending of the Holy Spirit.

The fourteenth century Byzantine theologian Nicholas Casabilas describes the role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist “The Church received the Holy Spirit after our Lord’s ascension; now she receives the gift of the Holy Spirit after the offerings have been accepted at the heavenly altar.”¹ The *Epiclesis* (invocation of the Holy Spirit) has been an integral part of all ancient Eucharistic Prayers and has been restored back in most western liturgies in the recent years.

Not only does the Holy Spirit change the elements into the Body and Blood of our Lord, but He also changes the faithful. St. Basil calls this change ‘communion of the Holy Spirit’ (2 Cor. 13:14). He describes it as a real sharing of the very life of God; by communion with him the Holy Spirit makes us spiritual, reestablishes us in Paradise, opens the Kingdom of God and admits us to filial adoption, gives us confidence to call God our Father (Rom.: 8:14-17, 26), and allows us to participate in the grace of Christ, to be called children of light and to share in eternal glory.² In this sense ‘the Eucharist is a perpetual Pentecost’.³ The Holy Spirit then speaks to us in every prayer, “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8: 26). In the Eucharist the Holy Spirit shares with the Church calling the Lord Jesus, Maranatha, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come’.... Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22: 17, 20).

This integral relation between the action of the Holy Spirit and action of the Son in the Eucharistic Prayer is described by a contemporary theologian who says, “It is the Holy Spirit who actualizes the economy of salvation in the Eucharist, who transforms the gifts and integrates the faithful in the Body of Christ.”⁴ St. Athanasius stresses that ‘the Holy Spirit completes the redemptive work of Christ, and makes the divine communion available to every person’. This is a real communion that the Holy Spirit accomplishes in the Eucharist by transforming the oblation to Christ’s Body; thus the faithful may be able to abide in him (John 6:56).

This close interaction between the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of Christ is seen in all the salvation history. It is the Holy Spirit who ‘spoke in the prophets’ who announced the Incarnation. Our Lord was ‘incarnated from the Holy Spirit’. In all his life on earth, He was led by the Spirit. Before his ascension, “He breathed on them (his disciples), and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). The Holy Spirit delivers to the faithful the fountains of salvation that came out once on Calvary (John 19:34-37), thus fulfilling the words of Christ that ‘He will take what is mine and declare it to you’ (John 16:14).

Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

The last promise of Christ to his disciples before the ascension was, “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Although this verse refers to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, yet it also includes his presence with his

1 Casabilas *N A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*. London: S. P. C. K. , 1966: 91.

2 Ernest Luissier, SSS: *Getting to Know the Eucharist*. New York: Alba House, 1974: 98.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid, p. 106.

disciples in all the aspects of their daily life. He is present in the poor, the needy, the strangers, the sick and the prisoners (Matt. 25:40). He is present in any Christian meeting according to his promise, ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt. 18:20). He teaches every faithful soul that meditates on Scripture in her closet, or in a Bible Study group. He is especially present in the Liturgy of the Word where He blesses those who see and hear him in it. “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Matt. 13:16) “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear” (Rev. 1:3). In the Coptic rite, these verses are always echoed in the *Litany of the Gospel* that is always recited by the priest before the gospel is read.

Christ is really present in all these daily experiences. Devout souls may even experience him and feel his work in them. Any negligence in these acts or lack of discerning the Lord in them may even result in the collapse of the whole Eucharistic action with grave consequences (Proverbs 21:13; Matt. 25:45; 1 Cor. 11:20; Didache 14). However, the Presence of our Lord in the Eucharist is on a different level. This is not due to the fact that the Eucharist is the summit and center of all the Church worship, the most important of her Sacraments and of the means of sanctification in her, nor in its essential role in our salvation. More important is the person of Jesus our Lord himself who is in fact really and totally present in it. This should not mean that his presence in the other actions mentioned above is less real. Christ is really present in all of them, but it is only in the Eucharist that He is personally present in his Divinity and humanity, his holy Body and precious Blood. In all the other aspects of his Presence, as well as the other Church Sacraments, one receives a special grace from him, or beholds a particular aspect of his Presence. In the Eucharist, we have Christ himself who is present before us with all his acts of salvation, the risen and glorified Christ.

Christ our High Priest

In the Eucharist one has to differentiate between the sacramental presence of Christ in the changed elements and his invisible presence as High Priest from the beginning of the liturgy. Liturgical scholars and other visitors to Coptic churches have been bewildered by the profound awe and reverence manifested by the people even during the *Offertory*, before the *Liturgy of the Word*. Even in that part of the service (paralleled by the *Great Entrance* in St. John Chrysostom’s Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox churches), while the priest and deacons carry the unconsecrated bread and wine and perform a circuit around the altar, all the people stand with their heads bowed down. Then they sing the words of the psalm, “This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech thee; O Lord! O Lord, we beseech thee, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord.” (Ps. 118: 24-26). It is significant that this psalm is a part of the *hillil* psalms that the Jews used to sing in the Temple, while they carried palm branches, during the Feast of Tabernacles. They used it also to welcome their triumphant kings. (1 Maccabees 13:51). It is

also the same psalm used by the children of Jerusalem before Christ on Palm Sunday. The verse, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' is also chanted in the liturgy before reading the gospel and several times during the Eucharistic Prayer.

One can understand the use of this psalm by the Church to address her Lord during the reading of the Gospel or after the consecration of the elements in the Eucharistic Liturgy. The problem that has faced theologians is how to explain the real Presence of Christ that is manifested in the Church during the Offertory while the elements are still unconsecrated. Liturgists offered several theories to explain this. Some were evidently wrong; others meditated on the rite while neglecting its original meaning. Receiving no detailed commentary on the Divine Liturgy from the Fathers, Coptic theologians who commented on the liturgy in the early part of the twentieth century copied some of the conflicting theories that were used by the Byzantine theologians to explain the rite as an allegory⁵. The Offertory has been explained as a symbolic action that expresses either the birth of Christ and putting him in the manger, or his death and laying his dead Body in the tomb.⁶ However, the spiritual truth that liturgical scholars have failed to comprehend was revealed by an author, who even did not belong to an Orthodox Church, but used to study and participate in Orthodox services in her last years. She says:

This rather clumsy theory does not seem to take into account the whole temper of this part of the service, the intensity of its spiritual realism; the fact that the congregation is gathered up to share an eternal experience, the ceaseless self-offering in heavenly places of Christ in and with his Church. 'We have been in heaven!' said the envoys of St. Vladimir when they returned from Constantinople to Russia after their first experience of the Byzantine Eucharist. It is from this point of view that we should understand the heightened tone of awe and joy, which follows the Great Entrance, and the remembrance, which is now made of the entrance of the risen Lord into the Upper Room. From this time onwards Christ is present: it is He, Priest⁷ no less than Victim, who celebrates his mysterious supper within the screen.⁷⁸

5 See *Eucharist between Reality and Allegory* (the second chapter in this book).

6 It is ironic that Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia, who did not believe in allegory in explaining the Bible, started this last theory. He believed that it is the real dead body of Christ that is present on the altar at this moment in the liturgy, to be later resurrected by the descent of the Holy Spirit. After his death, some of the theological writings of Theodore were condemned in the second council of Ephesus (449 AD). Father Gregory Dix has translated his homily on the first part of the Divine Liturgy (Shape of the Liturgy, pp. 282- 284).

7 See the earlier chapter '*Priest that Offers the Eucharist*'.

8 Evelyn Underhill: *Worship*, 154. It is evident that Underhill is describing here the Orthodox Byzantine liturgy. In the Coptic rite, the door of the sanctuary is always open during the whole Divine Liturgy. Although the Copts took the idea of the screen (iconostasis) from the Byzantine around the ninth century, yet, there is no barrier that separates the sanctuary from the people who are active participants during the whole service.