

THE DIVINE LITURGY:  
THE WINDOW OF HEAVEN<sup>1</sup>

*(A chapter taken from the booklet, "The Church at Prayer- The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart" by Archimandrite Amilianos of Simonopetra, page 65)*

**T**oday, my beloved, I propose to do something rather daring. I will attempt something which is certainly beyond my abilities. But I will do so out of love for those who have so often, and with so much attention and devotion, listened to me preach in this sacred place.

The subject which concerns us today is the spiritual life, a life which is inspired, guided, directed, and imbued by the Holy Spirit. It is a journey to heaven. The one who undertakes such a journey rises up to heaven, even though he still walks upon the earth. Going about his ordinary tasks, he celebrates a feast in heaven. He travels on the wings of the Holy Spirit, and his aim, his desire, his vibrancy, and daily concern is heaven.

But how often do we even think of heaven, living as we do amidst so many pleasures, and absorbed by so many trivial things? Our various preoccupations, like magnets, pull on our hearts, and make heaven appear too lofty for us to reach; something beyond our grasp and unattainable by any means. And if a person is lacking in spiritual experiences, if he has not turned his heart to heaven, if he has not visited there from time to time, or cast so much as a glance in that direction, then the danger is even greater. When people talk to you about a certain person, you may likely feel joy or longing for him. If, however, you don't actually see that person, then the possibility exists that you'll soon forget him. If, on the other hand, you do see him, it's very likely that your heart will love him, that it will attach itself to him, and that, from then on, you'll keep him constantly in your thoughts. It's the same with heaven. If only we could turn our gaze there, even for a moment, and catch a glimpse of its breadth, its beauty, its joy, and its grandeur! It would certainly be very difficult for our soul to forget such a thing. But how can we see heaven?

When the Israelites wanted to enter the city of Jericho, which they greatly desired to conquer, they knew it would not be easy for them

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<sup>1</sup>A Sermon delivered in the church of St. Nicholas, Trikala, Greece, 31 January, 1971.

to breach its high walls. So what did they do? They sent spies to bring back fruit from its fields. And the spies indeed brought back large clusters of grapes (Num 13.1-2). They also brought back some of its treasures, some of its precious stones, and a selection of its beautiful things. When the Jews saw them, their hearts were won over, and they said: "We will conquer our enemies". Then they stormed the walls, and, with God's help, tore them down and captured the city (Josh 6.120). If only we could open a window into heaven, and gaze upon it, and - if we found it pleasing - leap forward and enter in to see what might be there, to make it ours, to conquer it!

This is the act of daring which I would like to attempt today. Will I succeed? I've already told you that it is beyond my powers. Pray, then, that God will give me the words I need. And pray also that he will, at the same time, open your hearts, so that you will understand what I cannot tell you as I would like.

If you want to look upon some superb prospect situated on the other side of a mountain, what would you do? You'd climb up to some fine summit, and from there you'd let your eye range over all the beautiful places you were longing to see. That's what we'll do today. We've all come to church, to the temple of God, precisely to the place, that is, from where we can easily behold heaven, a region which is made radiant, beautiful, and adorned by the unfading light of the Godhead which shines with a threefold brightness.

The church, my beloved, in which we have gathered, along with every church, is a type, a sketch, a model, an image, a piece of heaven. When we're in church, we truly feel that we're in heaven. Why is that great dome placed above us? Precisely to raise our heart to heaven. Why are these Royal Doors here, which open at the start of the Liturgy? To show us how the heavens open up before us. Why is the church full of crosses? Why, up there, is Christ depicted celebrating the Liturgy? To show us that, when we are here, we are transported to heaven. Truly, but in a mystical manner, we experience in church moments of heaven.

This is why Saint Gregory Palamas says that the church "resides on high, being an angelic and transcendent place". It is an angelic and transcendent place that we are in now. The church, he tells us, "raises

man to heaven, and presents him to the God who is above all"<sup>2</sup>. The church takes us and raises us up and presents us to God himself. But is that what we feel? Is that our experience? When we come to church, does our soul have the means of perception necessary to sense and grasp these realities? What sort of people have we become? We know all the breeds of dogs and horses, we know the species of plants, the makes of motor cars and radios, but we often fail to know those things which have a direct bearing on our life. And so I want you to pay attention to what I will tell you today.

If we think about it carefully, we will realize that, whatever exists around us - the unfathomable depths of the sea, the heights of the heavens, the myriads of stars - all of this is nothing more than the poor little neighborhood of our planet. One day, it will all be gone. You've seen how the old houses are reduced to rubble when they want to build new apartment blocks. One day, everything in the universe will collapse just like that. Nothing will remain. There will be only the spiritual heaven, where Christ dwells. Let us, then, fix our gaze there.

We find ourselves in church. As we've said, it is the most suitable place from which to look at heaven. But where is the window? How are we to open it? The answer is simple. The window is the Divine Liturgy which we are celebrating. We aim to turn our eyes toward spiritual things. Let us therefore turn our soul to the Holy Spirit, and let us ask him to shine his light on the darkness of our thoughts. When he does, we will be able to feel, to believe, to understand, and make our own, everything which is said and done during the Divine Liturgy.

You have taken so much trouble to come here, and on such a cold day! And you are standing! Your efforts should not be wasted. And so let us ask the Spirit of God that not a single, unclear thought remain within us. We shouldn't leave church if our hearts haven't worshipped God, if we don't feel that our souls have been thrust into heaven, if we have not seen all that happens here.

At the conclusion of every Divine Liturgy, you should feel what a saint of our Church once said: "Now you have ravished my soul, and I

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<sup>2</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, *Sermon on the Publican and the Pharisee* (ed. Panayiotis Chrestou (EPE, vol. 9 [Thessaloniki, 1985], p. 50).

cannot contain your flame, so having sung a hymn to you, I go on my way"<sup>3</sup>. O my God, he says, I have felt you, I have listened to you, I've seen you alongside me; I have felt you pierce my heart with your arrows, set fire to my soul, light a flame which I cannot bear. And so I sing a hymn to you, and continue on my way, taking you with me. You will teach us the truth in all its fullness.

Our window, then, is the Divine Liturgy, with which we are so familiar, which we have grown up with since childhood, and the like of which does not exist on earth or in heaven.

How does the Liturgy begin? "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen". Why does the priest begin the Liturgy with these words? What do they mean? With these words, Christ unveils for us a marvelous sight. He presents us with a heavenly vision. Before our very eyes he opens up his kingdom. It's like going to a shop, and the shopkeeper unfolds a bolt of fabric, and you look at it, you feel it, you test its strength, you see its beauty and you say, "I'll buy that". This is what Christ does at the beginning of the Liturgy. Before our very eyes he opens up his kingdom for us to see it, for us to feel it, for us to be satisfied, and to say: "This is what I choose for my life". This is what our soul should feel at the beginning of every Liturgy. But does it?

The priest is aware of this while standing at the altar table. His heart beats loudly and he is nearly blinded, as Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus when he saw Christ (Acts 9.3-9). With the eyes of his spirit he sees the dazzling light of God. And so, overtaken by a state of ecstasy, he proclaims: "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". The glory of your kingdom, O Christ, fills all things. Have you been to a wedding, and seen when they prepare the bride for her photograph? The way her great veil fills the whole room, the way the edges of her gown cover the floor, in order to display all her glory and all her beauty? So too does the Church of Christ, at the beginning of the Liturgy, unfold herself, filling the space around her, before our very eyes.

What is this kingdom, which is blessed, glorified, honored, and

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<sup>3</sup> St. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 30 (PG 88.1160B).

superior to every other kingdom? It is the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. It is paradise, in which Christ has placed us; it is our holy Church. Its king is the God of three suns: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The servants of the king are the angels and archangels, along with the thrones, principalities, authorities, dominions, powers, the many-eyed cherubim, and the six-winged seraphim. The king's generals are the saints. Our Lady the Theotokos is the queen. The faithful soldiers of this kingdom are all those Christians who are ready to follow Christ, whatever the cost; all those who are ready to bear His honorable name, all those who make up His Church. All of them, then - Christ, the saints, the Theotokos, the angels, the faithful of all the ages - are with us during the celebration of the Liturgy.

So when the priest says, "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", he forgets everything: himself, his home, the world, everything he sees, and instead consecrates his heart and mind to that which unfolds before him, to the mystical, invisible things which Christ presents to him. Sensing the glory of Christ the heavenly king, the priest, with shaking knees, with a soul staggering under the burden of responsibility, and with eyes penetrating the mystery of the kingdom, says, with a trembling voice: "For all glory, honor, and worship are due to you" - to you, my Christ, who are exceedingly glorified, surrounded by saints and angels, to you is due glory, honor, and worship. Before us, then, is the whole Church. Before us Christ is present truly, really, mystically! "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them", says Christ (Mt 18.20). This is what happens during the time of the Liturgy.

What is the Liturgy? You will have noticed, on the white screen of the cinema, a small figure or an object, which initially appears in the distance, like a tiny dot on the horizon, and then it is slowly magnified and ultimately revealed in perfect clarity. That is what the Liturgy is like: little by little, before your very eyes, it reveals Christ and his kingdom.

During the celebration of the Liturgy, Christ is with us exactly as he was when he was teaching, when he made the lame leap and walk, the blind see, and the dead return to life. And this is not simply having the memory of Christ within our thoughts, but having Christ himself truly and concretely present before us. He is present - He, the teacher, the prophet, the miracle-worker. Christ who was crucified, who was raised from the dead, who ascended into heaven, is now before us! Everything

that we see in church: the great hanging lamps, the clergy, the altar table, the gospel book, the bread and wine, the Little and Great Entry - all are signs of the presence of Christ.

And so, with the Divine Liturgy, we continue the work of Christ, and every time we celebrate it, it's as if we draw Christ himself close to us. This is precisely what one of the prayers says: "You are seated on high with the Father, and invisibly present here with us". You are above the heavens, and at the same time invisibly, truly, here with us. This is why the priest, when he prepares to receive Holy Communion, looks at Christ with the eyes of his soul, and speaks to him in the second person singular: "Make us worthy, by your mighty hand, to receive your pure body and your precious blood". You, my Christ, by your mighty and undefiled hand, give me your pure body and precious blood. If we have spiritual eyes, we can see that before us stands Christ himself. And what do you do if you happen to be sitting somewhere, and all of a sudden you see someone you love? You get up and you run to them. In the same way, the Liturgy is a movement, a hastening to the beloved, an effort to seize hold of Christ, to take hold of him.

Do you remember Mary Magdalene? When she realized that she had Christ standing before her, she called him "Rabboni, which means Teacher", and sought to touch his garments, his body (Jn 20.16-17). Do you remember the woman with an issue of blood? Even though there were so many people pressing around Christ, she attempted to touch him in faith and with reverence (Lk 8.42-48). Remember Thomas? He placed his hands in Christ's wounds and cried out: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20.27-28). This is what we do at the time of the Liturgy! And then some of us ask where Christ is! Here he is! He's standing in front of us, he's with us, next to us. "The Master is here and is calling for you" (Jn 11.28), they said to Mary, as she wept over the dead Lazarus, her brother. In the Liturgy, the Master, Christ, is present, and calls each of us by name. The eyes of those who feel this sparkle with light, and they experience the joy of Christ. Everything is filled with joy. Everything is filled with light. Everything glorifies Christ.

And so when you come to the Liturgy, you should come with the thought that you are meeting Christ, along with the desire to touch him, as St. Methodios says: "I purify myself for you, O Bridegroom, and,

bearing brightly-glowing candles, I come forth to meet you".<sup>4</sup> O Bridegroom Christ, I keep myself pure and spotless for you, and I hold bright candles in my hands to welcome you. This is how we should come to the Divine Liturgy, which is the very presence of Christ and his kingdom.

Let's go a little deeper. Why do our services have Entries? Last night at Vespers, we saw the priest making the Entry, and then enter the sanctuary. In the Divine Liturgy, at both the Little and Great Entry, the same thing happens. And thus the Liturgy is a procession towards the sanctuary, a progression towards heaven. What do we do when we celebrate the procession of the saint of our city?<sup>5</sup> We carry about his icon, his relics, along with the liturgical fans and banners, and we converge in the square and sing hymns to our patron. So too is the Liturgy a procession, a progression, a journey toward heaven. To attend the Liturgy means that I have entered, not through my imagination, but truly onto the road which leads to heaven.

When there is an eclipse, the streets are filled with children and adults holding pieces of tinted glass to their eyes and looking at the sun. This is the Liturgy. It is a fixing of our eye, of our heart, on him who is enthroned in heaven. My life now revolves around Christ. For me, only one thing has value: the kingdom of heaven.

Are we, then, to abandon our family, our work, and our children in order to be constantly rushing off to Liturgy? No, my dear friends. See how great the love and wisdom of God is. All the daily events of our life can enter into the kingdom of God, and, what is more, they can serve as bridges transporting us to it. Everything can express our love for God. The love for your wife, the sacrifices you make for your children, your daily toil, your pain, your worries, your tears, your secret bitterness - all of these you must cast into the kingdom of God. In turn, God will sanctify them, render them holy for you, and give you strength

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<sup>4</sup> Methodios of Olympus, *Symposium* 11 (BEPES, vol. 18 [Athens, 1959], p. 86, lines 20-21).

<sup>5</sup> The procession of its patron saint, St. Bessarion, takes place at the Cathedral of Trikala, on the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman.

to carry on for the whole week. All of these things have their place, and indeed have value, in the eyes of Christ, as long as we don't forget that our aim, our goal, and that for which our soul thirsts, is the kingdom of God. Our aim should be God himself. Our homeland should be heaven. And this is what we mean when we say "Amen": Yes, my heavenly Father, I accept all that you tell me; I have begun my journey, I have started out on the road that will lead me to heaven. I will not stop until I arrive at the place where you are.

In the Liturgy, we travel toward the kingdom of Christ, and, at the same time, we are already present within it. Christ has raised us up to heaven, or - rather - he has brought heaven down into the church. All good things, such as our salvation, holiness, a share in his humility, and in general all his gifts, Christ gives to us in the church as a "dowry".<sup>6</sup> For us, the Liturgy is a pledge, an engagement. In the same way that one wears an engagement ring as a promise of marriage, so too my presence at the Liturgy means that I am linked with Christ, who promises me that, if I remain faithful, he will, without fail, bring me into the kingdom of heaven. Although still on earth, we live in paradise. And it is here, in the Divine Liturgy, my beloved friends, where this great truth is enacted.

Present with us when we celebrate the Liturgy is the whole of the Church of Christ. We are united with Christ and become one body with him. When you take a piece of white cloth, and place a powerful light behind it, the cloth becomes radiant and bright. In the same way, the rays of Christ penetrate us and make us christos. We become temples of Christ, members of Christ, we become christos, and he is our head. "Christ is the head of the church" (Eph 5.23), which means that he is the fountainhead, the source. When you are thirsty you go to the spring and quench your thirst. Christ is the one who refreshes our thirsty hearts. Our limbs and our flesh and our bones become the limbs and flesh and bones of Christ. We live the life of Christ, and Christ takes on our life.

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Kavalas, *On the Divine Liturgy* 1.2 (ed. P. Chrestou, PHNA, vol. 22 [Thessaloniki, 1979], p. 2; cf. J. M. Hussey, *Nicholas Cabasilas: A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* [London: SPCK, 1978], p. 25, who transposes the Greek noun "dowry" into the phrase: "God freely gives").

Just as the bread which we place in the artophorion<sup>7</sup> is one, just as the bread which we place on the altar is one, and just as Christ is one, so too when we have Christ among ourselves we become one: we become one Christ.

So what are we doing when we celebrate the Liturgy? We are having a reception, a supper. We invite as our fellow-guests the saints of our Church; we invite our father who has fallen asleep; our grandfather, our great-grandfather, our loved ones who have left us; we invite the angels. And Christ himself comes and provides his body and blood. And this is what it means when we say: "having commemorated all the saints, let us commit ourselves and one another, and all our life to Christ our God". Having welcomed all the saints into our midst, having implored them, and made them our helpers, we now give ourselves to Christ.

How is Christ rendered present in the Liturgy? Here let us pay special attention, so that when we attend the Liturgy, we can understand it better. In the celebration of the Liturgy, Christ is present along with the whole of the Church. The bishop is an image of Christ<sup>8</sup>. Where the bishop is, there too is the Church of Christ. This is why the bishop takes his place on the high throne, to show us that, at that moment, Christ is taking his place among us. There, where the bishop is; there, where the high priest is, Christ himself is truly present. When the disciples were gathered together in the upper room, Christ appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20.19, 21, 26). And when the bishop ascends the throne, it is Christ who ascends, extending his peace to us, for he is "the offerer and the offered"<sup>9</sup>. It is Christ who, in a deeper sense, celebrates the Liturgy, and we are with him, all around him. When there is no bishop, his place is taken by his representative, who, according to the canons of the Church, must have the bishop's permission to

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<sup>7</sup> The artophorion is a small liturgical vessel, placed on the altar as a container for a portion of Holy Communion, held in reserve for the sick and others who cannot participate in the Liturgy.

<sup>8</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Trallians* 3.1 (BEPES, vol. 2 [Athens, 1955], p. 272, line 14).

<sup>9</sup> Divine Liturgy, prayer of the Cherubic Hymn.

celebrate. If he doesn't have it, there can be no Liturgy<sup>10</sup>.

The priest is clothed in white, often luxurious, gold-embroidered vestments. Why? Because he's conceited? No, my dear friends. When he wears white vestments, his aim is to show forth Christ, who at the Transfiguration appeared clothed in garments whiter than snow (cf. Mk 9.2-3). Thus Christ is manifested, not simply in the person of the priest, but even in his garments. When he wears sumptuous vestments, he wishes to manifest the glory of Christ. When he puts on the sticharion, the first of his vestments, he puts on Christ. When he puts on the epitachelion, it is as if he is receiving the grace of God. When, finally, he adds the phelonion, he becomes a complete image of Christ<sup>11</sup>.

Do you see the priest in his vestments? He is no longer this or that particular priest, but Christ. No one else in the world wears the vestments that priests wear. They are something different from, something beyond the garments of the world. It is a strange spectacle, a heavenly vision, in order to show us that something heavenly, indeed Christ himself, has come down to us<sup>12</sup>.

Then the Royal Doors open and the priest appears in the sanctuary. Why, though, doesn't he look at us, but looks instead toward the sanctuary? When the priest stands in front of the altar, he is praying, and imploring, and calling upon Christ as our intercessor. And, afterwards, when the priest makes the Entry, he will again pass through our midst without so much as glancing in our direction. It is he who goes ahead of us, who ascends, who leads us on the road to heaven.

What is the significance of this behavior? Why does the priest always go in front of us without looking at us? Pay attention to this in order to understand. Have you ever been up to the monasteries of Meteora? Have you gone, for instance, to the Monastery of the Great

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the 39th canon of the Holy Apostles (*Pedalion* [Athens, 1970], p. 43); and Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrneans* 9.1 (BEPES, vol. 2 [Athens, 1955], p. 281, lines 29-30).

<sup>11</sup> The vestments mentioned here are roughly equivalent to the alb, stole, and chasuble.

<sup>12</sup> See the *Life of the Hieromartyr Pankratios of Tauromenia* (*Great Synaxaristes*, vol. 7 [Athens, 1976], pp. 157-58).

Meteoron? In the old days, people had to be pulled up there in a net. The gate-keepers would put them in it, close their eyes so they wouldn't get dizzy, and the monks would haul them up with a winch. Later on, they built a little path, extremely narrow, and wedged tightly up against the rock, which ran in the direction of the Metamorphosis mountain. So when a visitor came, how did he manage to climb up this very narrow pathway? If he looked down, over the edge of the precipice, he would surely have collapsed and been lost. But in those days a monk used to come down, and he would offer the visitor his cassock to hold and say to him: "As I climb up and look upwards, you hold on to me. We'll go up together. But don't look down. If you look down, you'll fall, and you'll pull me down as well". And so the monk would take him up that narrow, little path, with the visitor's heart pounding, because he knew that below was the abyss. He took him up, circling round and round, and when they arrived at the summit, he would say: "Ah! Here is Christ!" This is precisely what the priest does. He takes us up the narrow pathway. Be careful. Don't look down, lest something earthly should lead you astray. Keep your heart on high, your mind like an eagle, so that it can cut through the clouds and fly up into the heavens! Land animals can't fly. So be an eagle! Look up!

In the meantime, the chanters sing the antiphons: "By the intercessions of the Theotokos, Savior, save us". They sing them in combination with various verses from the Psalter, which are prophecies of the coming of Christ. They foretell Christ's presence among us. Then the priest makes the Little Entry, enraptured, because in reality he has entered like Moses into the cloud which conceals Christ. Let's recall what Moses experienced when he ascended Mt. Sinai. What thunder! What earthquakes, fire, and smoke! Such fear and trembling! God was present! (Ex 19.16, 18).

God is likewise present to the priest. There are, of course, no earthquakes here, so as not to frighten us away. Neither is there any smoke, save for that of the censer with its fragrance. The priest knows that Christ precedes him in the Entry, and being unable to contain himself, his heart cries out: "You are holy, our God, and to you we ascribe glory". You are holy, set apart, my God. The priest looks at the sanctuary and is certain that God, the Spirit, and the angels are there.

In the course of the Little Entry, the priest processes through the church until he reaches the customary place. There he asks Christ

that, with his own entry, there should be an entry of the holy angels and archangels. Then he says: "Blessed is the entry of your holy ones". He blesses the entry at which, along with the priest, myriads of angels and clouds of saints enter into the sacred space of the church. Together with them, treading on noetic clouds, the priest enters into the sanctuary. And fearful of being consumed by the fire of God, he says: "You are holy, O God", but I am a sinner, therefore do not burn me.

I had the good fortune to know a holy man who often, when he had celebrated the Liturgy, emerged from the sanctuary with an other-worldly look; with an eye which saw beyond the horizon. He used to celebrate the Liturgy alone, with the help of a young monk, to whom he used to say: "Go outside, go out, go out immediately". He would close the door and remain alone in the sanctuary, sometimes for an hour or two. Later, with his spirit bathed in the light of God, and with his eyes flashing with divine brightness, he would come to the door and open it. "Come", he would say to his disciple, "come and see: here was the Holy Spirit, there the Seraphim, there the cherubim", and he would tremble all over, but with a trembling which was full of joy and happiness<sup>13</sup>.

And we know that St. Spyridon "had angels concelebrating with him"<sup>14</sup>, and indeed every priest concelebrates with the angels and the saints. And the people, because they know this, sing the angelic hymn: "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal". The angels in heaven sing: "Holy, Holy, Holy" (cf. Isa 6.3), and we thus repeat their words. In this way, heaven and earth, angels and human beings, all of us together, form one choir, one festival, one song. For our part, we add: "Have mercy on us". It is the cry of sinful man, because the angels are holy and all-holy. Nevertheless, unworthy sinners conduct the Great Entry in the company of angels! Christ makes his entrance, together with his saints, his angels, and along with them go I, the sinful priest.

This is why Orthodox kings long ago followed the priest in procession when the Great Entry took place: they served as a kind of

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<sup>13</sup> See C. Philoathonites, *Papa Tychon* (Athens: Semantron, 1981), 23-24.

<sup>14</sup> Dismissal Hymn of St. Spyridon.

honor guard for the heavenly king who at that time was passing through the church. There is a tradition that one such king, during a moment of ecstasy, felt a shudder at the presence of Christ and his angels, and fell down fainting in his royal robes and crown.

After the Trisagion Hymn and the reading of the Epistle, as the priest is about to read the Gospel, he turns to the people, for the first time, and blesses them saying: "Peace be with you all". However, it isn't the priest who is giving the blessing at that moment, but rather Christ himself. As Christ was about to ascend into heaven, he raised his hands and blessed his disciples, and they worshipped him and went away (Lk 24.50-52). This is exactly what happens at that moment. The priest, the intermediary, the sinner, withdraws and leaves Christ himself to celebrate the Liturgy!

And this is why, at the Little Entry, the priest holds the Gospels in front of his face - not to hide his face - but for it to be clear that it is no longer he who is there, but only Christ. And when he holds it up, we sing: "Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ". We worship Christ, not a Gospel book, not the priest. Christ stands before us, teaching us. It is Christ who is the celebrant, Christ who speaks, Christ who is concealed in the priest. Before this, the priest says: "Wisdom, stand upright". What does this "upright" mean? It means that "we are meant to encounter God and the mysteries with anxious expectation, and not listlessly, but to enter into such communion with faithful zeal"<sup>15</sup>. With anxious expectation, with longing, with attention, and thus "upright" must we wait to see Christ and communicate with him. And this is also why we worship him.

When Christ passes through the church during the Great Entry, the priest says: "May the Lord our God remember all of us in his kingdom". In response, each of us should say: "Lord, remember me in your kingdom" (Lk 23.42). We see Christ with the eyes of the soul, and we ask him to remember us. It is the Lord who is the celebrant. It is he who passes among us. It is the Lord who comes to take our gifts, to place them on the altar.

As gifts we offer bread and wine. Bread sustains and gives life to

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Kavalas, *On the Divine Liturgy* 22.5 (Chrestou, p. 120; cf. Hussey, p. 61).

man, while wine gives him strength and health. And so when we give Christ the bread and the wine, we give him those things which nourish us, which give us life<sup>16</sup>. Mystically, symbolically, we offer to Christ our life, our health, our joy; we offer ourselves, we offer our difficulties, our pains, our longings, our children. We offer everything that is ours along with the whole world. This offering is made as the "prayer of offering" (*anaphora*) is said. The word *anaphora* comes from the verb *anaphero*, which means "I carry up". At this awesome moment, Christ receives our gifts, our life which we offer to him, and he places them upon the heavenly altar. He receives us.

When we go the Liturgy, we go to partake of Christ. But before we can partake, we must be ready to give him what he asks of us, to give him ourselves. If we hold things back, we can't be united with Christ. At that moment, Christ appears to us as a slaughtered, sacrificial victim, and we must likewise feel ourselves slaughtered for his sake; and we must be ready, if necessary, to die for him.

Throughout the Liturgy, Christ is continuously presented to us, and thus we sing "alleluia". At the Little Entry, after the reading of the Epistle, and again at the Great Entry, we sing alleluia. What does "alleluia" mean? It is a greeting which is exchanged at the marriages of Christ. We have special wishes and greetings for marriages. "My you live happily ever after for a thousand years", is a wish we often extend to newlyweds. "Alleluia" is also a wedding hymn, a greeting at the marriages of Christ, when Christ marries his bride, the soul. The Liturgy, with its theophanies of God, and with the continuous presence of Christ, is the contracting of a mystical marriage with the Lord. "Joy" is another word we use for marriage. In the Liturgy, it is as if Christ is saying to us: "Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25.23), that is, "into the marriages of your Lord".

And if you don't want to? If you don't want to, where then will you go to hide from him? Wherever you go, into the depths of the sea, or to the heights of the heavens, you will encounter his presence (cf. Ps 138.7-10). Somewhere he will overtake you, and make you his own. But wouldn't it be better to surrender of your own accord? You will see then

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.1 (Chrestou, p. 48, 50; Hussey, p. 31-32).

how great your joy will be! If you refuse, this will be for you a kind of suicide.

After he has given Holy Communion to the people, the priest elevates the chalice, and says: "Always, now, and forever, and to the ages of ages. Amen". In so doing, he reminds us of the Ascension of Christ, for this is the moment when Christ promises us that he "will be with us always" (Mt 28.20). Having received the Holy Spirit, having beheld the secrets of the kingdom, we can leave with the eyes of our soul brimming with the beauty that we have seen.

And so, my dear friends, our Liturgy is a pledge made by Christ, a marriage. Through the liturgy, he places us in his kingdom. Afterwards, however, we shall depart from the church, and we shall return home with our passions, our sins, and our unhappiness. But don't worry. We shall go to the Liturgy again, we shall seize hold of Christ again. He will divinize us again. And so with constant striving, with constant progress - the priest in front, ourselves behind - we shall reach the kingdom of heaven. Do we go to the Liturgy with this desire? If so, we have secured the kingdom of heaven.

We have seen the heavens open in the Liturgy. We have seen the good things of the kingdom of heaven. We have received our dowry, the Holy Spirit. We have learnt that he whom we seek can be ours to embrace, that our sinful souls can take hold of him in church. Each time we come, let it be in order to take hold of Christ, and pull him mystically and invisibly within ourselves. And when we leave, let it be with souls rejoicing, and let us "entrust our souls, and deliver our life to him". Let us entrust our souls to Christ, whom we have seen, and let us dedicate our life to him, and "let us set our hearts ablaze with the fire of his love"<sup>17</sup>. Let us set our heart on fire with the flame of his love, with a fire which burns up within us everything that is rotten, and which will cleanse us in preparation for eternal life.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1.12 (Christou, 42; Husey, 29)