

The Society For Ecumenical Studies

The Thanksgiving Of Eastern Christendom

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*Our persuasion is consonant with that act of thanksgiving
and that act of thanksgiving establishes our persuasion...*

St. Irenaeus of Lyon

Liturgy literally means act of the people at large, of all people capable and willing to contribute to a universal act of gratitude towards the Master and Maker of all. It is an all-encompassing act, which cannot be undertaken by individuals, cannot become a matter of privacy, like prayer (Mat 6: 6), and does not pertain to “personal” contact or bilateral relationship with God. It is meant for the crowds, all races and languages of humankind even all kinds of angelic hosts. In modern vocabulary, we may describe it as a “Creation Service” where, all creatures endowed with reason should normally be represented in the offertory and thus become a “rational, yet bloodless self-oblation”. The purport lies in overcoming the strings of personhood or individuality (which safeguard and maintain all divisions) thus becoming “members one of another” (Eph. 4:25) “yet but One Body” (1Cor.12:20). For only in one mouth and in one heart may the humankind glorify and praise its Maker and Saviour, as it is made in His single Image. Moreover, this unique Image alone is destined to ascend to its Archetype and be One with It for evermore. Hence, the Liturgy aspires to celebration and foretaste of humankind's real destiny.

Conscious that such a destiny is not ever to prevail in the course of history, early Christians longed for “the Life of the Age to come” when they could enjoy Christ’s **Real Presence** in uncreated Glory eternally “ being assembled together with Him” (Act.1:4) exactly as happened so many times after His Resurrection. Their desire was to be with their Risen Saviour “always, even unto the end of the world” (Matth.28: 28), as they knew by experience that whenever He was **Present** the end of this world had already come and His uncreated Kingdom “was come upon them” (Luk.11:20).Indeed the earliest surviving text of an Act of Thanksgiving (Didache, x. 6) contains the epiclesis: “Let Grace come and let this world pass away! Hosanna to the Son of David! If anyone be holy let them come, if anyone be not holy let them repent. Maranatha! Amen!” In these few words the purpose of the Eucharistic Assembly is made manifest: to make – even for a short while - mankind’s destiny a tangible reality, by offering another chance to the Risen Lord of all to reappear in the midst of His brothers (Heb.2:12) thus saving them through their immersion into His Glory (2Tim.1:10) and empirically reassuring them that the salvific “union of all” human beings within His immortal Body is inevitable.

Apparently, had such a purpose proven unattainable, there would have been no reason for early Christians to assemble, or express thankful elation at promises supposed to be fulfilled only at the end of time. The mere fact that they did assemble to perform particular Acts of Thanksgiving and worship their Saviour, demonstrated that **Salvation** was identical with their experience of “having seen the True Light, having received the Heavenly Spirit, having found the True Faith and worshipping the undivided Trinity” precisely because Christ’s promises - as for their community - had already been fulfilled, certainly not because they were to be fulfilled and that in time unknown... All their Eucharistic celebrations were responses to actual experiences of the Salvific Real Presence of their Risen Lord in their midst. They rejoiced over facts, not over mere expectations...

Significantly, such facts persuaded them that Salvation was the inevitable destiny of all human beings and precisely this **persuasion** had shaped the

celebratory character of the early Eucharistic rites. Universalism as the normative mindset of the primitive Christian worship was expressed ideally in a triumphal Act of Thanksgiving, which thus became a spontaneous vehicle of the earliest Christian articles of faith: Christ's victory over death, unlike the victories of the Roman Emperors, had a beneficial impact upon humanity in its entirety. There were no losers; all mere mortals, the dead in particular, had won with Him. That explains why the celebration of the Eucharist became so meaningful. It was a clear sign to those who could perceive it that the cosmic victory of Christ has **already** saved the World; not just part of the World, nor only the righteous and the good. He could never permit that even "one of these little ones should perish" (Matt.18: 14). His was an absolute and everlasting Triumph; and precisely this triumphant worship of Christ as eternal Victor, Saviour, Lord and Master of the Cosmos in the Eucharistic assemblies had precipitated persecution against His worshippers as explicitly counteracting the worship of the Roman Emperors and usurping their authority. It comes as no surprise then, that during the first three centuries of the Christian era no great effort was ever made at consolidating any doctrine distinguishing Christians from non Christians, once enthusiasm about the common fate of mankind within the Body of Christ remained the core of the Good Tidings and moved both pagans and Jews to align themselves with that inescapable End.

This alignment meant that initially the sole requirement for partaking in the Eucharist was nothing less than being **human**. There is ample evidence of it in early Christian literature: 1Cor. 14: 22-25 is the best-known New Testament passage witnessing to the presence of "unbelievers" at Eucharistic assemblies as a routine procedure. The Didache passage quoted above treats both "sides" of those present, the "holy" and the "unholy" ones, alike. Only from the late fifth century AD onwards and not without a good reason, explained below, the Holy Communion is gradually seen as the exclusive prerogative of the holy ones amongst the believers. Thus the admonition: "The Holy Things (are) for the Holy (Ones)" is introduced into the Eastern Eucharistic rite as if signifying the very beginning of a slow and long decline marked by increasingly precarious ambivalence as to whether any solid

criteria for holiness could ever be established by any human standards. Even so the congregation's rectifying response "One is Holy, One is Lord, Jesus Christ to the Glory of God the Father" tacitly redresses the balance indicating that in this life there is no other way to holiness apart from being integrated into the Body of Christ, a process coinciding with humankind's inescapable destiny. Unlike the fashion of this world, neither Saints nor sinners can retain any trace of personal distinction or notoriety after becoming Christ either by grace or contrary to grace (Col.3:11, Eph.1:23).

In its formative period spanning almost five centuries the Christian Act of Thanksgiving had successfully shunned all tempting calls to become definitely divisive and exclusive; even the order of catechumens – gradually formalized only since the second century AD - despite their temporary exclusion from receiving Holy Communion, were confirmed as Christians in the beginning of their catechism as the 7th Canon of the 1st Council of Constantinople (381AD) and St. Cyril of Jerusalem in the Foreword of his Catechism clearly testify. And rightly so: People would be baptized at that time not in order to attain to individual salvation in the life to come, (by severing themselves in this life from all those who were supposed to perish) but in order to unite **immediately** themselves with all members of Christ's Risen Body and thus become the *first-fruits* of His salvific victory over death in the course of their mortal lives...

Of course, there were mishaps and misadventures in pursuing union with the Risen Lord and experience of His Life. There were people who eventually found out - after their baptism – that the description of their *own* either *reflective* or *intuitive* apprehension of Christ did not coincide with the *common* experience of the members of His Body, in fact it contradicted theirs. By declaring unreservedly such finds, these people questioned the tangible reality of Salvation and afflicted those who longed for experience of the Life in Christ. The reaction of those living genuinely in Christ was to bar dissenters from their Act of Thanksgiving, fearing the presence of people having a different sense of Christ and thanking Him for different reasons might render their Thanksgiving meaningless. The destructive measure was initially introduced as means of temporary discipline aiming at healing rifts but

eventually became the norm for maintaining unanimity within Eucharistic communities. Consequently, though nobody intended any revision in belief or practice, the universal setting of the Eucharist could no longer be fully sustained. Transformation into a private affair of distinct traditions gradually replaced Catholicity in a sequence of desperate attempts to preserve the original cosmic dimensions of the Eucharist; moreover, Christianity was wrongfully established as the State Religion of the Roman Empire in 380AD. Hence, dissent from Orthodoxy was legally put on a par with the most serious crimes; at the same time, the bishop ceased being a *servus servorum Dei* to become a public official, a *vir venerabilis*. By making their secular authority as Roman Prefects felt, precisely as had their colleague, the Prefect of Judea Pontius Pilate, the bishops constituted one of the most blatant ironies of an up- to-then persecuted Church. They transmogrified the Church into a horrendous persecutor of heretics as if Christ Himself needed help, support and salvation by those who believed in Him as their God and Saviour! In fact, the corrupted systems of all Imperial Christian Establishments constantly needed to be salvaged ever after...

Thus, the multiple divisions of humanity continued up to this day as it became gradually and painfully apparent that humankind did not possess naturally the capacity of discerning Divine Truth from its falsifications. The ritualistic injunction: "The doors! The doors! Let us mount guard at (them) in wisdom!" dismally echoes this still unfolding tragedy...

Modern "Orthodox" Christians can hardly understand their **own** liturgical tradition. It is no longer **Catholic** in the original sense of the term as Catholicity can never – strictly speaking – become a tradition; (its *raison d'être* lies in incessantly doing away with "*that which is in part*" (1Cor.10:13) whereas traditions can never be ridden of partiality as they tend always to insulate their own followers from the rest of humankind). Compromised by lack of Catholicity and imbued since the 17th century with imported Sacramentalism, the Eastern "Holy Liturgy" has been virtually reformed into

imposing nationalistic pageants that substitute for the original Act of Thanksgiving – avidly watched by devoted ethnic communities, striving to submit themselves to the conformities which incomprehensible ritual dictates. Having been transformed into convention to observe rather than any more an event to be inspired with, the Liturgy no longer succeeds in making humankind's destiny tangible. In its current nationalistic settings, humankind is predestined to hell. This "Divine Service" now attempts at persuading Christ and the Saints to preserve the national identity of particular ethnic communities; it is a sheer routine of survival, serving epigones so that they do not lose caste among themselves. They alone shall inherit the Kingdom.

Very few among these varieties of heirs suspect that they might be abusing Christianity. An ill-befitting nostalgia for past national certainties in the face of current international impasses persuades them to partial viewing of reality. Pristine utopias looming for ages over their respective "orthodox empires" have greatly contributed to that end; it is a dead loss when expressed in terms of Christian worship; yet attempting to be "orthodox" today without such "historical" baggage would be like going on holiday without any bookings. A good number of extenuations have been posited to justify these obsessions, the least flimsy of which is, of course, the acculturated nature of the Liturgy, as expression of a realised Christendom, a *created* Kingdom of God "on earth, as it is *not* in Heaven"!

Bishops, monks and theologians, however, faithfully following the example set earlier by western churches, went to very great lengths in recent years in order to re-invent Orthodoxy and – particularly – the Liturgy. The bizarre outcome of their soul-searching is a queer redefinition of the Eucharist supposedly reconnecting its original meaning with the neo-orthodox mentality. According to this advancement: "For orthodox Christians the Liturgy, or Eucharist, provides the *central model for action*. We offer bread and wine, *the creation of humans* from the raw fruits of the earth, grape and grain, as an act of *responsible creativity* but also of thanksgiving which refers *both* our *creativity* and our *creations themselves* back to that same God in three

persons who created the world and endowed us with our *defining* gift of creativity, in His own image.”^[1]

If we were to take seriously these contentions, we ought to revise radically not only the original context of the Eucharist but even Christian Anthropology itself; the following points are quite indicative of some ensuing discrepancies:

- a) If, indeed, human creativity is “referred back” to God as a *fourth* element along with bread, water and wine, then the Eucharist should read, “*Our own of Our own we offer Thee...*” otherwise it is inaccurate and misleading - albeit water in particular cannot be mistaken for a human product. Human creativity *per se* can be neither confounded with its own output nor indistinguishable from Divine Creativity. If it were, then all human creations would be fake and human freedom a mere illusion. If God Himself remains the active factor within human creativity, such creativity is no more human than it is *Divine* and thus *Uncreated*. It cannot be offered as a *human* gift to God; nor can be a Divine Gift to Him, as it is preposterous to offer one of God’s attributes to God as a *human* act of *responsible* creativity. The same cannot apply to bread, water and wine, as they— unlike creativity - are concrete creatures occurring neither in the Divine nor in the human nature whereas creativity is a *natural* attribute or energy of both these natures.

- b) All living creatures possess creativity as part of their potential; yet their potential energy is never fully released; nor is always such a potential fully realised in all animals, human beings included. Primitive tribes, the mentally impaired, and the majority of those with very low IQ or otherwise deprived and destitute, “all that labour and are *heavy laden*” (Matt.11:28-29), can hardly be creative; yet the latter are the most likely to take Christ’s yoke upon themselves! A great number of Saints comes from their class. This means that factual creativity is not an absolute requirement for being human, let alone for becoming a Saint; as such, creativity can neither *define* humanity nor be humanity’s *response* to its Maker...

- c) Even if God were to consecrate human creativity the same way He does for the bread, water and wine, we would still find it extremely unreasonable if not impossible to entertain the thought that He would do so for weapons of massive destruction, lethal injections, abortion and torture equipment and an endless list of evil inventions, all of which constitute nothing else but mere achievements of human creativity...
- d) The Eucharist can by no means be described – at least in its orthodox perspective - as an act of “referring back” to God some fruits of the earth in return for “the *gift* of God’s Son’s presence in and with us”^[2] nor can the Real Presence of the Risen Body be actualized at human will. Amazingly, this is exactly the understanding of the Eucharist promulgated by the fourth Lateran Council in 1215AD. Indeed that Council distinctly specified that the Eucharistic elements are transubstantiated “...to the effect that we receive from what is His in what He has received from what is ours” (*ut ... accipiamus ipsi de suo, quod accepit ipse de nostro*) that is to say, as He never assumed Divinity from His mother’s body, we shall never assume Divinity from His Body! It is all about tactful *quid pro quos* of created gifts – interplay between scholastic exploitations of God’s incarnation and man’s redemption.
- e) In conclusion one may notice how close to medieval Roman Catholic thinking the neo-orthodox theology has come particularly in its thoroughly anthropocentric approach of the Eucharist as a model for *human* action, which completely displaces Christ’s action as Everlasting High Priest (Heb.6:20, 10:10, 13:15, Eph.5:2), (Who, being Himself the ultimate firstfruits of all creation, offers His very Self as Thanksgiving on behalf of all humanity) albeit witnessed even in the Prayer of the Cherubic Hymn^[3].

At such a unique and hushed moment as when it comes to worshipping “Jesus Christ, the true God” (1Joh.5:20), no “true worshipper” (Joh.4:23) looks for *models* for action. Obviously, if a real Act of Thanksgiving is taking place, the One to be thanked **must be visibly Present**. In the primitive Act of Thanksgiving all depended on that Presence. In fact the true worshippers assembled in order to **cause** that Presence in their midst “just as at the meal on that First Day of the week, the Easter Day. Christ was not yet regarded as descending into the elements but His coming, His Presence was nonetheless Real...It was realized **immediately** but apart from the elements. Christ comes to eat **with** the community...He comes to participate in the meal (Act.1:4) and not to serve as food”^[4] Yet His participation culminated in the Act of offering food to His Eyewitnesses (Joh.21:12-13).It was that very Act of Giving that made all the difference by *consecrating* (Joh.17:18-19) the recipients to bear witness to His Resurrection (Act.4: 33). The Giver Himself mattered incomparably more than any created Holy Gifts. The idea that, already in His Uncreated Kingdom, the Risen Christ could neither give nor receive *anything* inferior to Himself was predominant amongst Judaeo-Christians in identifying the Given bread as His Body and the Given wine as His Blood. Both these elements as well as the *fish* in Joh.21:13 and the *salt* mentioned in Acts 1:3(original Greek only, cf. Lev 2:13), are His Body and His Blood, that is to say, nothing less than Himself, only because He had given them to people *with His own Hand*, not because their nature had changed through a “supernatural” act. All the more so the Recipients themselves after having been fed from Christ’s own Hand, no longer remain lesser than Himself.(Joh.17:19 Heb.2:11) They are now able to identify even the assembly of their fellow-Recipients as the Body of Christ and themselves as *members in part* because of their true **Communion** with Him(1Cor.10: 16-17). True integral Communion always identifies the Giver with the Recipient making **one** entity out of both (Joh.17: 22-23). The Hebrew idea that when God’s Hand opens up favourably, ineffable blessings reach His creatures is deeply rooted in the Old Testament: “Thou openest thine hand and satisfiest the desire of every living thing” (Ps. 145:16; also104:27-28, 88:5). Judaeo-

Christians perceived Christ as the Right Hand of the Father, the paramount bounty God has ever extended to humanity.

The Eastern Liturgy has preserved to this day the cluster of these beliefs and ideas, unfathomable though as they stand to more or less westernised congregations. Anyone who is still capable of giving the liturgical text a proper reading can spot the difference in emphasis between a Hebraic East and a Scholastic West. The Eastern rite aptly climaxes not to a “transubstantiation” of the Holy Gifts but to the very act of the **Holy Communion**. “Advance, O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, out of Thy holy dwelling-place, and from the throne of the glory of Thy kingdom, and come to hallow us, Who sittest on high with the Father and art here invisibly present with us: and deign with Thy mighty Hand to give us a share in Thy spotless Body and precious Blood, and by us **all** the people”.

In this astonishing fifth century prayer, three things are utterly made manifest:

- 1) Although the prayer is recited after the consecration of the Holy Gifts, the Lord Jesus Christ is mentioned as sitting on high with the Father and not as having descended into the consecrated elements. The mere fact that He is also invisibly present as Omnipresent, is definitively suggesting that He is not **visibly** present in the consecrated gifts.
- 2) The crucial event, which there is no guarantee it will come about, remains Christ’s descending from His throne, coming to stand in their midst and distributing His own Body and Blood to those assembled. There is ample evidence in early patristic texts and lives of Saints of a widespread belief based on both visions and teaching that Christ had repeatedly been seen to be selective regarding communicants. In the 6th century Life of St Symeon, Fool for Christ’s sake, for instance, we read that only blind people and husbandmen/women were most likely to be given communion by Christ’s own Hand. Receiving Communion otherwise meant at that time only failure to remain a live member of His Body. The liturgical text itself reflects this constant fear on behalf of the

celebrant priest or bishop: "...and hinder not the grace of Thy Holy Spirit from the Gifts lying before Thee, because of my sins..."^[5] No one can ever compel Christ, or "gird Him and carry whither He would not" (Joh.21:20); nor faithful may ever take the same initiative as "he that dippeth *his hand* with Him in the dish" (Mat.26:23)

- 3) Hence, it remains settled that the consecrated bread and wine become certainly the Body and Blood of Christ only if given by His Hand and only in the mouth of such Recipients, who, in turn, experience the very same clear signs of integrally belonging to His Body and not being themselves (Rom.14:7-8; 2Cor.5:15; Gal.2:20) each time they receive Communion from His Hand. This elucidates the meaning of such a cautious proclamation: "The Holy Things are for the Holy Ones".

St. Irenaeus has inadvertently shown forth himself as the perennial champion of proper Eucharistic practice. At the time, he only meant to fight off heresy, not to interpret the Act of Thanksgiving. In the event, he did so and as brilliantly as no one else ever did, so that his contribution remains immensely cogent to this day. His radical views have laid the foundations of orthodox Christian worship East and West alike.

Irenaeus' argument is profound and far-reaching: He begins with "Proof that God did not appoint the Levitical dispensation for His own sake or as requiring such service; for He does, in fact, need **nothing** from men".^[6] Anyone presuming that Judaism or Christianity would be impossible without priesthood aligns with heretical reasoning according to Irenaeus, since God could always save the world through Christ's divine humanity alone, i.e. without additional sacerdotal mediation(1Tim.2:5, Heb.8:6). History has proven him right in the case of Judaism (since the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD) and even in the case of the Russian Old Believers who survive without clergy since the 17th century.

Certainly, fallen human status brings on a "need" for ministry: "God does not at all stand in need of man's love; yet the Glory of God is wanting to man

(Rom.3:23), which he could obtain in no other way than by *servicing* God.”^[7] This does not mean that human beings have no right to opt out of God’s service by not seeking perfection through glorification; nor does it mean that God takes amiss such dissenting options. “Servicing God” can be meaningful only as a spontaneous and overwhelmingly grateful move having nothing to do with duty or obligation and very much to do with *natural* disposition and responsiveness. The latter posits that everyone is equally attracted toward serving God, yet not that all human beings ought to submit themselves to such a service.

Sticking to their Jewish roots, early Christians were keen to serve God by making their firstfruits offering as representative as possible of God’s creation in its entirety, as was customary in Jewish feasts. “The firstfruits of corn, wine and oil and honey and of all the increase of the fields and the tithe of all things” (2.Chron.31:5) were already essential part of Jewish sacrifice and offering rites and remained so in early Christian worship. Certain communities added even cheese in the offertory. The understanding of the human first-born males as firstfruits, whose very existence is a short-term loan from God and must be returned to Him by immolation, was an integral part of their ancient tradition. Although superseded at a very early date by the practice of substitution or redemption (Ex.34:20) in fact this tradition was never abolished. The story of Isaac’s imminent sacrifice by his father exemplifies this substitutionary-redemptory practice (Gen.22:1-14). Christ’s self-sacrifice (Joh.10:17-18, Heb.7: 27, 9:14) has in turn confirmed human self-oblation as the utmost firstfruits offering (1Cor.15:23). Christ reversed this long established practice by making His Body the final and **everlasting redemption** (Heb.9:12), which supersedes all firstfruits sacrifices, including those of human bodies, instead of their being substituted by animals. (In the case of Isaac the substitute, a ram, prefigured Christ as the ultimate Atonement Day scapegoat, ritually killed outside the walls of Jerusalem: Heb. 13:12, Gal.3:13, 2Cor.5:21).

Taking up the powerful argument against repetitive sacrificial worship whereon the letter to the Hebrews (Heb.10: 1-18) had left it, St. Irenaeus

reiterates Psalm 40: 6 “Sacrifice and offering Thou didst not desire but a **Body** hast Thou prepared me” (Septuagint) in order to prove that “by this verse David prophesied the New Covenant”^[8]; wherein Christ’s Body comprises the only appropriate sacrifice. Hence, “both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are **all** of one stock; for which cause He is not ashamed to call (all human beings) brethren” (Heb.2:11, Joh.17:19) thus proving Himself the First-Born amongst all brethren created in His Image and Likeness (Rom.8:29). The very Body, which God had eternally prepared for Christ, is humankind in its entirety. The Church had so early acknowledged Itself as being that Body because the Body’s Members could clearly see that It is predestined to absorb **all** humanity(Rom.8:32). Only the **beholders** of that inevitable End yearned to assemble and celebrate the Eucharist, fully aware that “of His own will” they had already become themselves “a kind of firstfruits of His creation” (Jam.1:18)

Therefore, they properly *thanked* God by appearing constantly before Him- every Sunday in particular-and humbly reoffering their very selves as “reasonable *service*, a **living sacrifice**, holy, acceptable unto God” (Rom.12:1). Having realised that the Crucified and Risen Christ’ s Body is “the **first-born** of all creation” (Col.1:15) in strictly *ritual* context, that is to say, “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev.13:8, 1Pet.1:19-20), “**once offered** to bear the sins of **all**”(Heb.9:28, 1Joh.2:2), they, accordingly, would sacrifice/redeem themselves for His sake(1Pet.4:1) in all possible ways, “at all times and at every hour” so as to comprise His perpetual Sacrificial or Eucharistic Body, “the general assembly and Church of the **first-born**” (Heb.12:23). This meant that all those who really partake in an Act of Thanksgiving intend to make themselves “a **rational** and un-bloody sacrifice” alongside the Bread and the Wine. That is why the Holy Spirit is invoked primarily upon them and secondly only on the irrational and lifeless elements: “send down Thy Holy Spirit upon *us* and on these proposed gifts”.^[9]

The idea that the Holy Spirit consecrates human sacrifices first occurs in the letter to the Romans (12:1, 15:16) along with the description of the preachers of the Gospel as sacrificing priests using the word of God as sacrificial knife

(Eph.6:17) in order to make the human sacrifice acceptable to God! The paradoxical supplications following the consecration of the Gifts can make sense only in the aforementioned context implying that “the general assembly and Church of the first-born” together with the local congregation are sacrificially offered to God in each Act of Thanksgiving. “Having (offered to God this rational and un-bloody sacrifice on behalf of) **all** Saints now commemorated-including those comprising the congregation-again and again in peace let us beseech the Lord. For the precious gifts offered and hallowed let us beseech the Lord! That our God, the Lover of mankind, Who *hath accepted them* unto His holy and heavenly and spiritual Altar, for a sweet smelling spiritual savour, may in return send down upon *us* the Divine Grace, the Gift of the Holy Spirit, (again!!) let us beseech the Lord.”^[10] The ancient substitutionary- redemptory practice is obviously re-enacted here transpiring that all those mentioned by name in the Office of Oblation and represented by tiny particles of bread placed on the paten for each particular name (of both living and dead) are being treated as *firstfruits* together with the Saints. Hence, they are sacrificially offered to and hallowed by God, in order to receive the Holy Spirit thus becoming the Body of Christ and joining the Church of the first-born. The congregation are already “Saints”, having been hallowed through the **acceptance** of their firstfruits in the supra-heavenly Altar at the moment of the Epiclesis, but their membership of His Body, is to be constantly re-attested (2Cor.13:5) by receiving Holy Communion from Christ’s very Hand.

St. Irenaeus testifies: “He who offers is himself *glorified* (Joh.17:10) in what he does offer *if his gift be accepted*”^[11], pointing out at once that God categorically commanded Moses: “Thou shalt not appear in the *Presence* of the Lord thy God empty” (Ex.34:20). “We are bound, therefore, to offer to God the **firstfruits** of **His** creation...so that man, being accounted as grateful by those firstfruits in which he has shown his gratitude, may receive that *Glory*, which flows from Him”^[12]. He further elaborates that “sacrifices do not sanctify a man, but it is the offerer’s *persuasion*, when it is earnest, that *hallows* the sacrifice and thus moves God to *accept it* as from a friend.”^[13] Humanity, according to Irenaeus, is innately possessed of sacerdotal power and can

hallow the creation by offering it in all sincerity to its Maker. It would have been preposterous for Irenaeus to imagine that in order to fulfil such a *natural* function human beings may need special consecration or “ordination” by any God-appointed authority, as if their *consubstantiality* with the Everlasting High Priest’s Humanity (Heb.2:11, 10:10, 1Pet.2:4-5) were inadequate to impart to them a *natural* share in His Priesthood! All they need to enact appropriately their natural priesthood is ceasing being *individuals* by building coherently themselves into Christ’s Household (Heb.3:6, 1Pet.2:4-5, Eph.4:11-13). This sacramental coalescence alone enables humankind to offer “the **Sacrifice of Praise** (Ps.49:14 Septuagint) to God *continually*, that is, the Fruit of their lips giving thanks to His Name” (Ps. 34: 1, Heb.13: 15), “that they might be themselves neither unfruitful, nor ungrateful”^[14]. This along with the plural number of the verbs in all Eucharistic prayers sufficiently explain why it remains inconceivable in the East to this day that a single person might ever “say Mass”...

What we understand as “ordination” today, New Testament writers and Apostolic Fathers perceived as the *exclusive liturgical function* of a “**multitude** of disciples”, assembled “with **one** accord”(Act.2:1, 15:25, Rom.15:5-6). Their function consisted in the **perpetual task of commending themselves and each other and all their life to Christ their God**. There was no such thing as *permanent* appointments, since those “ordained” never ceased being part of the appointing “multitude” which **re-commended** them each time they undertook new *holy orders* on behalf of the same multitude(Act.15:2, 22; 20:32)^[15]. Any sharp distinction between “clergy” and “laity” was thus made impossible: (Deut.9:29, Act.26:18, Col.1:12). No prestige of incumbency would make any sense in such context rather than the paramount authority of “the **multitude** of the disciples” (Act.6:2, 5) enabled by the Spirit to *recommend each other* for Divine Service by *commending them to Christ through laying on of **their** hands* (Act.13:1-3) and thus rendering them *acceptable Servants* of His Household.^[16] The actual celebrant of the Eucharist and all sorts of “ordinations” occurring therein was this mighty *multitude* of the faithful, not a single priest or bishop. Hence, the latter was appositely described as *Servus Servorum Dei*.

As natural priesthood is perfectly exemplified in Cain and Abel's sacrifices (Gen.4:3-7), Irenaeus makes his most powerful point out of this biblical narrative in order to emphasize the significance of **innocence** and **purity of heart** in attaining to acceptable service to God. "Since the beginning God had respect to the gifts of Abel, because he offered with innocence and righteousness; but He had no respect unto the offering of Cain, because his heart was divided with envy and malice, which he cherished against his brother as God points out when reproving his hidden sin: "Though thou offerest rightly, yet if thou dost divide rightly, hast thou not sinned?"(Gen. 4:7, Septuagint). God is not appeased by sacrifice. For if any one shall endeavour to offer a sacrifice merely to outward appearance, unexceptionably, in due order, and according to appointment, while in his soul he does not assign to his neighbour that **koinonia** with him which is right and proper to nature, nor is under the fear of God; - he who thus cherishes secret sin does not deceive God by that sacrifice which is offered correctly, as to outward appearance; nor will such an oblation profit him anything as sin renders him the destroyer of himself ".^[17]

It is extremely important that the notion of sin - first time appearing in the Bible in this *liturgical* connection - indicates *lack of koinonia with God*. Moreover, it signifies not only that lack of such koinonia leads to disintegration and death, but that such koinonia is impossible without koinonia with **all** consubstantial human beings and the rest of the creation through its firstfruits. Koinonia among His creatures and with Himself is the aim and absolute condition of worshipping Christ, the Union of all divisions. "For we have given nothing to Him previously, nor does He desire anything from us, as if He stood in need of it; but we do stand in need of *koinonia* with Him. For this reason it was that He graciously poured Himself out (Phil.2:7), that He might gather us into the bosom of the Father... As we are His members (Eph.5:30) we are also nourished by means of His creation – and He Himself grants the creation to us, for He causes His sun to rise and sends rain when He wills (Matt.5:45). He has acknowledged the cup of the wine-from which He nourishes our blood and which is part of the creation-as His own blood; and the bread from which

He gives increase to our bodies-also a part of the creation, He has established as His own body. Therefore, wine mingled with water in the cup and manufactured bread - the elements whereby the substance of our flesh is increased and supported - receive the Word of God and they become Eucharist, the Body of Christ.”^[18]

Valid Eucharist according to St. Irenaeus is the one that interconnects and unites the Creator with His creation, the Act of Thanksgiving for *Salvation*. It is spontaneously offered by an already **saved** (2Tim.1:9) “multitude”^[19] –never by individuals- on behalf of the **humankind** which in Irenaeus’ eschatological perspective is already the Body of Christ, as predestined to be united with Him. “Vain, therefore, are the Ebionites, who do not believe in the Union of God and mankind...and reject the commixture of the heavenly Wine in the cup and wish it to be water of this world only, thus not receiving God so as to have union with Him, but remaining in the first Adam who had been conquered and was expelled from Paradise.”^[20] “Nor the Jews offer appropriately; for they fail to acknowledge The Word through whom the very act of offering His creation to God is made possible. Nor, again, does any assembly of heretics offer properly the Eucharist. For some, by maintaining that the Father is different from the Creator, do – when they offer to Him whatever belongs to this creation of ours – set Him forth as being covetous of another’s property and desirous of what is not **His own**.”^[21] Undoubtedly, St. Irenaeus would have included in his list of heretics/ invalidators of the Eucharist all neo-orthodox “churches” which construe the Eucharistic offerings as products of **human** creativity and therefore not **His own of His own** as the liturgical text insists in vindication of Irenaeus’ testimony. However, he did not think excommunication or other forms of exclusion a necessary step against heretics; they are amply paid for their deviations by Christ’s *visible absence* from their midst.

There is nothing as hellish for Irenaeus as Christ-less “Eucharistic” gatherings: “Those, again, who maintain that all creatures originated from apostasy, ignorance and passion, do, while offering unto Him the fruits of ignorance, passion and apostasy, sin against their Father, rather subjecting

Him to insult than giving Him thanks. But how can they be consistent with themselves while saying that the bread over which thanks has been given is the body of their Lord and the cup His blood, if they do not acknowledge Himself the Son of the Creator of the world, that is His Word, through whom the wood fructifies and the fountains gush forth and the earth gives “first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear”? (Mark 4:28). Let them, therefore, either alter their persuasion or cease from offering such gifts. Our persuasion alone is consonant with offering **God-created** gifts as an act of Thanksgiving and that act of Thanksgiving in turn establishes our persuasion. For **we offer to Him His own** thus manifesting that of their own accord the (human) flesh and the (Holy) Spirit are in Communion (*koinonia*) and actual Union.”^[22] This is exactly the original import of what we still call **Holy Communion**.

It is a **full circle** of communion between God and humanity, which includes “the quick and the dead”. “For as the bread, which comes from the earth, by receiving the Epiclesis of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly, so also by partaking of that Eucharist, our bodies, holding out the hope of the resurrection, may no longer remain corruptible.”^[23] Unlike Thomas a Kempis’ precursor, Nicholas Cabasilas, a 14th century Byzantine convert to Rome, St. Irenaeus need not have mused over weird “imitation-of-Christ” theories of salvation. involving daily Holy Communion of All Souls - administered to them by Angels from earthly Eucharist - in order to retain their *koinonia* with Christ until His Second Coming. Once they departed this life being Members of His Body, the Communion of Saints retain full *koinonia* with Him precisely because of their membership in that unique Body which is risen from the dead – not in isolation – but as “the **firstfruits** of those who are asleep” (1Cor.15:20) – the first instalment of a harvest which foreshadows and pledges the ultimate offering of the whole. Because Christ is raised from the dead, the resurrection of mankind is assured. “For the Lord, having been “the first-born from the dead” (Col.1:18) and having received into His bosom all His ancestors, has generated them (Joh.1: 13) into the life of God, He having been made Himself the beginning of those who live, as Adam became the beginning of those who

die (1Cor.15:22). Wherefore Luke, commencing the human genealogy with the Lord, carried it back to Adam (Luk.3: 38), indicating that it was He who generated mankind into the Gospel of Life and not mankind Him.”^[24] “He commenced afresh the long line of human beings and furnished all of us in a brief, comprehensive manner with Salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam - namely the mode of existence in the Image and Likeness of God- that we recover in Christ Jesus”^[25].

Early Christians could not see any need for either “*sacerdotium*” or “*sacramenta*” being conferred on them in order to be enabled to express their gratitude for the Gospel of Life and universal Salvation to their Risen Lord. The particular Day of their exultation, the Day *after* the First Day of Passover, had already been fixed as *Thanksgiving Day on behalf of humanity* in the Jewish Law and made known as *Sheaf Day* (Lev.23:7-21). That Day of universal gratitude had Christ specifically assigned to rise from the dead, in order to make His Risen Body the **immortal Firstfruits** of all those who fall asleep, the utmost guarantee that they shall also rise.

Philo, the unwitting father of early Christian liturgical practice, perfectly describes the profound meaning of that Jewish Day of Thanksgiving. “But within the Passover Feast, there is another Feast following directly *after* the First Day. This is called the “Sheaf”, a name given to it from the ceremony which consists in bringing to the altar a sheaf as a first-fruit, both of the land which has been given to Israel to dwell in and of the *whole earth*, so that it serves that purpose both to that nation in particular and for the *whole human race* in general. This follows from the fact that the Jewish nation is to the whole inhabited world what a priest is to a City. For the holy office in very truth *belongs* to the Jewish *people* (Ex. 19:6, 1Pet. 2:9), in so far as they carry out all the rites of purification and both in body and soul obey the injunctions of the divine law...It is therefore taken for granted that a life in conformity with divine law (cf.Rom.2:10-16) necessarily confers Priesthood or rather High Priesthood on those who lead it.”^[26] This view partly explains why, initially, early Christians (overwhelmingly of Jewish background) identified themselves as the New Israel or “the Israel of God” (Gal.6:16) confident as they were that

by acknowledging Christ as their Messiah, God and Saviour they retained their entire sacerdotal and spiritual heritage (Rom. 9:4).

The Sheaf succinctly exhibits *Thanksgiving* as the core of Jewish worship. “On account of all those creatures wherewith mankind has been invited to be in *communion*, it is meet and right that the hospitality of God should be praised and revered, God Who provides for His guests the whole earth as a truly hospitable home.”^[27] By *being thankful* (Col.3:15) to Him “we learn not to neglect benefactors; for he who is grateful to God, Who needs *nothing* in His own fullness, will thus become accustomed to be beneficent to men whose needs are numberless”^[28] Even more significantly the Feast of the Sheaf reveals the substantial *link* between Jewish and Christian worship. It contains the reasoning out of which the **Risen** Body of Christ had been identified with both the *Firstfruits* of the earth and the *Firstfruits* of the dead. It makes manifest why the Eucharistic Gifts are identical with that **Risen** Body, why Christ *is* indeed the Resurrection (John 11:25) of **all** mere mortals, why the early Church identified itself with Christ’s **Risen** Body. Finally, it vindicates the decision of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) that Easter Day must always be celebrated on the Sunday *after* the first day of Passover.

The message of the Eastern Liturgy is crystal-clear: Christ’s world-redeeming Self-Sacrifice was **not** accomplished on the Cross! Humanity was saved only when He offered His sacrificed and **Risen** Body as everlasting Firstfruits(Heb.10:12) to His Father, Himself and the Holy Spirit on the very Day of Thanksgiving, the Third Day after His Death and **the Gift was accepted!** It was the very first “**living** sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God” (Rom.12:1) for until then the immolated animals lain dead on the altars of Jerusalem “could not hallow him that did the service” (Heb.9:9). All human corpses were also unclean, defiling those who made contact with them. Even worse and most distressing of all, the dead were cut off from any communion with God (Is.38:18, Ps.6:5, 115:17) unless they were already united with Him before departing this life (Luk.20:38). Even the latter remained unjustly deprived of their bodies (Rom.5:14) until that very Day of Thanksgiving (Mat.27:53), when Christ “offered to God His own Self undefiled” (by death)

i.e. **alive** (Heb.9:14)^[29]. This is the One Offering (Heb.10:14) which early Christians meant to identify themselves with, in order to be sacrificed with Christ according to His Will (Joh.17:19, Heb.10:10). Their reasoning was plain: “If we become identified with Him in His death, we shall also be identified with Him in His Resurrection” (Rom: 6:5). They were not so idiotic as to believe that a *personal relationship* with Christ would suffice for them to be saved. They knew all too well that only **identicalness** with Him at the **human** level (which in Him is fully **divine**) could safeguard their salvation while they were still in this life. “For He bound the strong one (Mat.12:29) and set free the weak human race and endowed His own handiwork with Salvation by destroying sin...Thus He caused mankind to become **One** with God...For unless it had been God who had freely granted us Salvation, we could never have possessed it with certainty.”^[30]

It is precisely this certainty that persuaded early Christians to end their Sunday Matins service with the triumphal hymn: “*This Day is Salvation come to the world...*” Although it seems pointless for anyone to partake in an act of Thanksgiving without being possessed of such certainty, yet the mere fact that this Thanksgiving was always meant to be offered on behalf and **because** of the salvation of all human beings, naturally disposes everybody to “*taste and see that the Lord is **Good***” (Ps.33:8)...

Notes

- [1] Friends of Mount Athos *Annual Report* 2003, p.39
- [2] *Ibidem*
- [3] "For Thou art He that offerest and art offered, and receivest and art distributed, Christ our God ..."
- [4] Oscar Cullmann, *The meaning of the Lord's Supper in Primitive Christianity*, Essays on the Lord's Supper, Richmond, Virginia, 1958 p.15
- [5] Liturgy of Basil the Great, Prayer **after** the consecration of the Gifts
- [6] *Against Heresies*, book IV, chap. XVII English translation by A. Roberts and W.H. Rambaut, Edinburgh 1868
- [7] *ibidem* XVI, 4
- [8] XVII,1
- [9] Liturgy of John Chrysostom, the Eiclesis Prayer.
- [10] *Ibidem*
- [11] XVIII,1
- [12] XVIII,1
- [13] XVIII,3. Cf. XVIII, 6: "we render thanks...thus **hallowing** the creation" Cf. Joh.17:19. In all three passages Irenaeus treats Jesus' Prayer in Jn17 as a Eucharistic Anaphora, prayed upon Himself and His disciples as being themselves the oblation. This is only one of the reasons why there is no thanksgiving upon bread and cup in the Fourth Gospel.
- [14] XVII,5
- [15] There is no doctrine of "*indelibility*" of "*sacraments*" in the Eastern Church. The inceptive *Office for Permission* (Kairos) aims at re-enacting the celebrant's Priesthood, which is subject to authorization by the congregation.
- [16] R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, Edinburgh 1994, pp.163-175
- [17] XVIII, 3. Cf. *Didache* 14: 2 : "Let no one that hath a dispute with his fellow come together with you until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled".
- [18] Book V, II, 2
- [19] Cf. Book IV, XVII, 4: "It is evident that God did not seek sacrifices and holocausts from men, but faith and obedience and righteousness, **because of their salvation**".
- [20] *Ibidem* I, 3. The dualist sect of the Ebionites celebrated the Eucharist using only water in the cup, unable as they were to accept any koinonia between matter and Spirit. Their practice was *consistent* with their doctrine.
- [21] Book IV, XVIII, 4 - 5
- [22] *Ibidem*.
- [23] *Ibidem*
- [24] Book III, XXII, 4.
- [25] *Ibidem*, XVIII,1
- [26] *De Specialibus Legibus*, II, 162-64. Cf. Justin, Dialogue, 116, 3. On some interesting aspects of Rabbinic Universalism as well as their Pauline parallels see Alan F. Segal, *Universalism in Judaism and Christianity in Paul in his Hellenistic context*, edited by Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Edinburgh 1994.
- [27] Philo, *ibidem*, 173. Cf. Gregory Palamas, Homily 3, *On the Parable of the Prodigal Son*, 4 - 12
- [28] *Ibidem* 174
- [29] What later developed into two distinct Feasts, the Ascension and the Pentecost (Wheat Sunday), was initially celebrated at Easter as the Gospels of Luke (24: 50-52) and John (20:22-23) respectively suggest.
- [30] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book III, 6-7