

## *Views from the Pews: Towards a Theology of Catholic Experiences of the Liturgy*

### **An Eastern Orthodox Perspective**

Archpriest Paul Elliott, Rector of the Parish of St Elisabeth the New Martyr, Wallasey, and Chancellor of the Diocese of Great Britain and Western Europe (ROCOR)

Hello everyone. It is somewhat amazing to me to be involved in what would seem to be an august gathering of Roman Catholic Scholars. I am perhaps Father Dominic's wild card, an unseeded player at Wimbledon brought in to surprise you all. What I do know, is that I am actually representing my Bishop, His Grace Irenei, Bishop of London and Western Europe whose erudition would have been rather less surprising a contribution. I do have, perhaps, an unusual history which is somewhat relevant to some of the themes exemplified by the contents of the video testimonies which we have all seen and which Father Dominic kindly shared with the speakers before-hand. More of that later.

It would be remiss of me not to make some reference to the turmoil my poor and beloved Orthodox Church is currently undergoing with seeming divisions and difficulties caused by the war in Ukraine. I have no solutions to this turmoil and there are no easy answers to this dire situation. The war is fratricidal and terrible and our mutual response must be to pray for a cessation of conflict and pray for those killed, injured and displaced. We can only pray and maintain our faith that the love of God will prevail and express that love by a generous response to the anguish unleashed by this war. In my own congregation I have families deeply affected. Russian Orthodox people who are Ukrainian and Russian with relatives in both countries. Only last Sunday, one of my elderly parishioners, Nina, told me that her 92 year old brother and his 89 year old wife had been killed in the Donbas. She has no idea which army fired the shells, only that her family members had felt that they had been far too old to move out of harm's way. Her sister has already been made homeless and is now a refugee in Voronesh, in Russia. Her house was destroyed by shelling whilst she had just popped round to her next door neighbour for a chat and a cup of tea. This is a far more complex situation than we imagine and its consequences will be felt for generations. In our confusion and sadness, it is surely good to reflect upon the words of our Saviour just before His voluntary passion in the Gospel according to St John: "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

As you can see, I am an Orthodox Priest. I serve the Russo-Byzantine Rite in a style that was prevalent just before the Russian Revolution, a style or typicon particular to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. It retains certain customs which are not found elsewhere. In some ways, its alleged conservatism has a commonality with the perceived conservatism of the those who prefer a traditional approach to the Roman Rite. However, it is, I believe, a misunderstanding to equate our approach to traditional Liturgy as conservatism. It is something distinctive and different to this. The critics of a more traditional approach to Liturgy ignore the fact that traditional Christians both in East and West are seeking to be a part of a living, organic and dynamic tradition which is not static nor is it an archaicism preserved in aspic. There are romantic but erroneous fantasies that both the Eastern Rite in its current form and the pre- Vatican 2 Latin Mass are the unchanging expression of the Apostolic Tradition somehow caught in an ideal time when all was well and wonderful in

the Early Church. There is an innocent naivety in this view. A more considered, reflective and informed observer or student of Liturgy, comes to realise that rites evolve and develop naturally and within God's providence and goodness. Style, expression and even language change but the essence of the rites and their divine purpose do not. Reading the works of Father Louis Bouyer or Fr Joseph Jungmann, it would be easy to get swept up in the somewhat harsh critique of the more traditional styles of serving the Eucharist, the critique of the lack of active participation of the laity, the alleged distance that both the Byzantine Rite and the pre-Vatican II Mass have from the original Apostolic purpose of the rites, the apparent abandonment in the past of any kind of proper Liturgical action in favour of some kind of non-participatory performance. The Liturgical Movement prevailed in my lifetime and not only had its profound influence upon the Western Church but in a strange way even had an impact upon the East.

Unfortunately, this impact has not brought about the wholesale return to Apostolic fervour that the proponents of the Liturgical Movement had hoped for. In reality, their reforms have coincided with a huge falling away of attendance. This striving to reach a new generation in a new style, often divorced from traditional ways of serving the Liturgy, has been counterproductive in many ways. I read recently a passage by the then Cardinal Ratzinger which struck me very hard:

More and more clearly we can discern the frightening impoverishment which takes place when people show beauty the door and devote themselves exclusively to utility.<sup>1</sup>

We see so much of this and the drive for "utility" both in the church and in the world is, in fact, a destructive force impoverishing the human spirit and limiting the human experience to the material alone.

Let us return to my initial comment that my experience is not dissimilar to that expressed by many of the participants of the video testimonies attached to this conference. As a child, from the age of five I was my father's server in an extreme Anglo Catholic Parish. This was an English Missal parish where my father served the Mass in a very traditional manner. As he did not recognise the validity of Anglican rites, he would only use the Roman Canon of the Mass. However, he served this in silence even at a sung mass. As a little boy I still remember the intense reverence, awe and mystery, the Divine Presence, which pervaded the Mass. A presence which converted me as a little boy to want to be in the courts of the house of the Lord. Again, at University in Exeter, I worshipped at St Mary Steps, a beautiful Medieval Church with an ancient Rood Screen. Father Moreton, my parish priest and Liturgy lecturer served an extraordinary rite. It was the Roman Mass in an early Medieval style in traditional English using a translation by Coverdale which had been prepared for the 1548 Prayer Book but never utilised (except by Father Moreton!) Again, like when I was a boy, I knew that I was in the Divine Presence. I believed that this was an authentic expression of the undivided Church. Of course, I romanticised this notion but nevertheless, this is my abiding memory of the experience of worship. Naturally, none of this can be scrutinized in terms of validity or canonicity. Such thoughts do not sit well with *Apostolicae*

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), p. 128, cited by Fr Giles Dimock O.P. "Baroque Liturgy on Trial" (*Sacred Music* 116/2, Summer 1989, pp. 19-24), p. 23.

*Curae*<sup>2</sup> and of course are not consistent theologically. However, they are much more to do with the encounter of the soul with the heavenly world.

Not surprisingly, when I was sent to attend the Orthodox Liturgy by Father Moreton in the summer of 1976, I began a journey of encounter which I am still on. Though I had no understanding of the rite, no knowledge whatsoever of Church Slavonic, no active participation at all, my prevailing impression was one of Divine Presence. I was once more at my father's side, as a little boy, enjoying the sensation in my innermost being, of just being with God and I just knew that this was my home. The Divine Liturgy had fulfilled one of its principal functions, to continually convert those who attend, to continually convey "things heavenly" and "things eternal" to use the words of the Liturgy of St Basil where he says in the Anaphora;

Reward them with Thy rich and heavenly gifts; give them things heavenly for things earthly, things eternal for things temporal, things incorruptible for things corruptible.<sup>3</sup>

It is this purpose or function which is so often lost in the drive for relevance and the enslavement to the banality of utilitarianism. Liturgy evangelises, liturgy changes, liturgy transforms, liturgy reveals, liturgy enlivens. To put it another way, Fr Robert Taft teaches that, "In spite of its great solemnity, this Liturgy at its most basic, takes the ordinary but universal fears and needs of human life and turns them into Theophany, the signs of God."<sup>4</sup>

St Thomas Aquinas in Book 3 of the *Summa Theologiae* sets out the Divine purpose of the sacraments. Their purpose is three-fold. St Thomas teaches that man is such that he comes to know things, comes to encounter, through the senses. Secondly the sacraments are provided by God as a "means of salvation" in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs.<sup>5</sup> This same man has senses originally created to encounter God but infected with the disease of Original Sin. The sacraments are a "healing remedy" which restore the senses of man to their true purpose. Thirdly the sacraments redirect man towards a true use of material things because otherwise "man is prone to direct his activity chiefly towards material things."<sup>6</sup> The sacraments purposely free man from his idolatry of the material world and make whole man's perspective upon the world, both visible and more importantly, invisible.

In the video testimonies, there are themes attempting to express this. James said that the Mass gave him a sacred connection with God, Justin found that the Mass revealed the Real Presence, Liam loved the level of reverence in the Mass that was heaven on earth, with beautiful symbolism in every minute detail, Karen found the reverence to be timeless. Some of the contributors spoke of tranquillity, of the Mass being Christ centred, ancient and universal, connected with the past and the communion of saints.

If the Liturgy is no longer a Theophany, to use the description of Fr Robert Taft and no longer an encounter with the sublime, then it is failing to fulfil its primary divine purpose. If

---

<sup>2</sup> Pope Leo XIII's Bull of 1896 which declared Anglican Orders null and void (editor's note).

<sup>3</sup> Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St Basil.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1984), pp. ix -x.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III.60.4 resp.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. III.61.1 resp.

that which is experienced in the Liturgy is mundane, ordinary or simply banal how can it be transformative? How can it change us, the faithful? The Divine Liturgy is, or should be, for traditional Christians in both East and West an extraordinary event, not bound by time or space, but taking us outside ourselves into the Divine Presence. St John Chrysostom speaks of the Divine Liturgy as follows:

The choirs of the triumphant and militant church unite themselves to the Lord in divine action; that with Him, in Him and through Him, they may gain the heart of God the Father, and make His mercy all our own.<sup>7</sup>

This attitude of the worshipper, this inner change or restoration, is why we come to church. Why do you and I bother to take time for this encounter? We do this because God, in His love for us, has given us the sacraments and primarily the Eucharist. I still have my mother's Missale Romanum which she always had in her pew. In the introduction there is a quotation from St Francis de Sales;

The Mass is the most holy, sacred and august sacrifice...the centre of the Christian religion; the heart of devotion and the soul of piety: a mystery so ineffable, as to comprise within itself that abyss of divine love, when God communicates Himself really to us, and, in a spiritual way, replenishes our souls with spiritual graces and favours.<sup>8</sup>

With such thoughts in mind permit me a few reflections of the Divine Liturgy of the East. It is routinely said that the Divine Liturgy in the East is seen as a reflection of the Divine Liturgy in heaven. It is a representation in layer after layer of symbolism of the transformation of all that is worldly and human into all that is other worldly and divine. We hear that it is this experience of the other world which converted the emissaries of St Vladimir when they attended the Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sofia in the Great City of Constantinople at the height of the Byzantine Empire. That its intense beauty transformed the worshippers and took them to heavenly places.<sup>9</sup> Each Divine Liturgy served on earth has this at its core. On Desert Island Discs, the infamous Malcolm Muggeridge chose the Slavonic Creed as one of his records... Why...because it was within the Divine Liturgy at Zargorsk that he finally realised that his atheism was at last overcome and defeated and it was here that he encountered God in the faith of those worshipping Him in this extraordinary event. He had been taken there to laugh at their simplicity and superstition but he found the very opposite. Their faith was infectious...he at last encountered "things eternal and things heavenly", something his intellect had sought to deny him throughout his life. His senses, to use the phrase of St Thomas Aquinas, were healed and at last harnessed to the true purpose of his life, to live in the Light and the Love of God.<sup>10</sup>

What if all the glorious setting of the Divine Liturgy is swept aside, the churches destroyed, the clergy imprisoned or even shot, the Faith prohibited as it was at the height of the Red

---

<sup>7</sup> As cited by St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, II.xiv.1. This quotation has not been located in St. John Chrysostom's writings, but resembles passages in *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 36.8, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 20.5, *On the Priesthood*, 6.4, and *Against the Anomians*, 4.1.

<sup>8</sup> St Francis de Sales, op. cit. II.xiv.1.

<sup>9</sup> *Russian Primary Chronicle (Chronicle of Nestor)*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Cf *Summa Theologiae* III.60.4 resp above (n. 5).

Terror in the 1920's in Lenin's Russia or the purges of Soviet society between 1937 and 1942 under Stalin. St Joseph of Petrograd who refused to cooperate with the Soviet Regime, continued to serve the Divine Liturgy completely illegally. He was a very tall man. To serve the Liturgy he and his congregation hollowed out an underground church in the earth with access only from a tiny trap door hidden in a basement. The only access was through a tunnel which St Joseph had to crawl along to get into church. The Divine Liturgy was served with great awe and intense reverence. In place of the glorious polyphonic chant that St Joseph had been used to and that, in normal times, filled the church, the Divine Liturgy was whispered in case they were discovered. Yet the very core and purpose of the Divine Liturgy was fulfilled and the people of God were still fed and transformed by the gifts of God and no doubt they went away with their souls restored. So it is that the Divine Liturgy has evolved to convey the Divine Presence no matter what terrible circumstances may surround it. Incidentally, St Joseph was shot in Alma Mata in 1938 with another famous hierarch, St Kyril of Kazan, for supporting and aiding itinerant priests and enemies of the Soviet State.

It is patently obvious that beauty and otherworldliness can and should be conveyed through the eucharistic rite even in its most stripped back form. No doubt some of you are able to tell of stories of the Western Mass being served in similar circumstances in the camps of the Second World War. My first Liturgy in Munich was served on the tin vessels made out of jam tins in Dachau which are treasured in the Monastery of St Job of Pochaev. This has always been a salutary reminder to me that so much of the material outer signs of Liturgy can be stolen from us by the enemies of the Church but they can never, nor will they ever, defeat the Presence of the Source of all love, namely Christ Himself.

If we become aware of the Divine purpose of the Eucharist we can understand why St Thomas Aquinas uses a quotation from the Gospel according to St John, Chapter 10 verse 10: "I have come so that they may have life, and have it more abundantly." Aquinas teaches that the sacraments, especially the mystery of the Eucharist, provide the principle means for man, the son and heir of the New Covenant, to be conformed to Christ." Here we have the very essence of the teaching of the Church from Apostolic times until now. We do not conform to the world: rather we are conformed to Christ.<sup>11</sup>

So often, both traditional Orthodox and traditional Catholics are accused of archaicism or obscurantism. Wanting to preserve something of a bygone age now passed and no longer of consequence for the modern world which thinks that it has grown up and no longer needs what the Divine Liturgy or the traditional Mass seeks to provide. Yet, where the traditional rites are served in their traditional ways, there is a flowering of spirituality and a transformative power not present sufficiently in so called relevant, accessible and modernised Liturgy. Indeed, such relevant and accessible Liturgy is having a corrosive effect upon the faithful and is undermining the very essence of what it is to be a human being in need of transformation and salvation because, at its worst, it leaves the worshipper as they are and does not seek to challenge them to lead a life where our Saviour reigns in their hearts.

That we are not obscurantists nor are we promoting archaicism but living tradition can be well illustrated by a solemn moment in the Russo-Byzantine Rite at the epiclesis or the calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the Gifts. In the Russian Rite in particular, the epiclesis is extended by the Prayer of the Third Hour. This sequence is one of the most solemn of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Chapter 6, lect. 4, n. 910; cf ST III.79.1 resp.

rite rarely if ever heard by the faithful, only those in the altar. The bishop or priest raises his arms to heaven and repeats this prayer...

“O Lord, who didst send down Thine Most Holy Spirit at the third hour upon Thine Apostles, take Him not from us, O Good One, but renew Him in us, who pray unto Thee”

This is repeated 3 times with two Psalm verses said by the Deacon. It is one of the holiest parts of the Divine Liturgy which is served with intense reverence in the Church Abroad. Yet actually, it is not that ancient as far as we can tell. We hear that the Russians have changed almost nothing since they received the Liturgy from the Byzantines in 988. This is a delusion. This extended epiclesis, possibly a reaction against the much simpler and less developed epiclesis in the Roman Canon, is only found in *Sluzebniks* (Priest's service books) from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century published in Venice. So it is a development...should we then strip it away as some purists say...certainly not. It is a very distinctive part of the Russo-Byzantine Rite as we serve it and it conveys by its gestures and contents a profound truth and heartfelt prayer. The Byzantine Rite has developed over the centuries. It is a living tradition not archaicism for the sake of it. What would we get if we took the Divine Liturgy back to the time of St Ignatius or St Hippolytus or St Irenaeus of Lyon, St Ambrose or Pseudo Dionysus. All that the Divine Liturgy is now embraces this vast and holy legacy and builds upon these foundations. We would get the impoverished invention of scholars and not the living tradition of the church.

It is just the same in the West. The Mass has developed and changed in its external forms and expression. Layers of symbolism and beauty adorned the Mass and communicated the Divine Presence. The delusion that we can strip back the layers of development to get to the true rite is indeed a delusion. To continue with a living tradition is actually crucial and this crucial element of church life has been derided since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in some intellectual and reforming circles. Indeed, the natural development of the rite was interrupted by some of the reforms after the Second Vatican Council. I found this quotation in the writings of Fr Giles Dimock O.P from the sermon preached by Bishop Jerome Razonus at the last session of the Council of Trent, a Council much criticised by those who in recent times have steered the church in the West away from some of its living tradition.

Since such is the nature of man, that he cannot easily, without external means, be raised to meditation on divine things, on that account Holy Mother Church has instituted certain rites, namely that certain things be pronounced in a subdued tone and others in a louder tone: she has likewise made ceremonies such as mystical blessings, lights, incense, vestments and many other things of this kind in a accordance with Apostolic teaching and tradition, whereby both the majesty of so great a sacrifice might be commended, and the minds of the faithful excited by these visible signs of religion and piety to the contemplation of the most sublime matters which are hidden in this sacrifice.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the intentions of the fathers of the Council of Trent were not so flawed after all. The mantra, if you will pardon the expression in this Christian context, of the Liturgical movement, and one that I have heard expressed even in the Orthodox Church, has been a push for “active participation” as if this were the Holy Grail which has eluded the faithful or been denied them for the last 500 years or more. Thus, in the Eastern Rite in some parts of the Orthodox diaspora, we hear now the private prayers of the priests boomed into a microphone

---

<sup>12</sup> Roy J. Deferrari, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma, a Translation of Denzinger's Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 30th ed. (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1957), 943/p. 290, cited in Dimock, p. 21.

and the parts of the service once reserved for hearing only within the altar and addressed to God alone, being broadcast out into the nave on loud speakers as if this is somehow going to include the faithful. This is as a result of some liturgical scholarship believing these prayers to have once been public prayers and their private recitation being an abuse. In God's providence, they developed differently if this was indeed ever the case. Here is a discernible influence of the Liturgical Movement onto the life of the Orthodox Church. Silent, adoring participation is looked down on. It is not active enough.

In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which I think is a document of the Second Vatican Council, we find a definition of "active participation" in the Liturgy being "full, conscious and active."<sup>13</sup> This has been the excuse to seem to strip the Mass in the West of much of its beauty, reverence and sense of the numinous and leave something which has a tenuous connection with holy tradition in the pursuit of simplicity or authenticity. To return to the voice of Cardinal Ratzinger, "simple Liturgy does not mean poor or cheap Liturgy; there is the simplicity of the banal and the simplicity that comes from spiritual, cultural and historical wealth." His view of "active participation" is at variance with so much that has been promoted since the 1960's even in the East.

Liturgy implies a real relationship with Another, Who reveals Himself to us and gives our existence a new direction. The Liturgy grows organically, like a beautiful rose bush, incorporating the good things of the culture in which it finds itself but always in a way which remains coherent with what has gone before. The Liturgy remains above all as a mystery not of human origin but of divine origin which has developed not through the will of man but by divine providence and, in its living tradition reveals and conveys divine presence.<sup>14</sup>

In some ways, Cardinal Ratzinger is here expressing an evangelical truth so often forgotten or shelved in the pursuit of addressing the world where it currently is rather than challenging it to become what God created it to be. Indeed, he quotes St Matthew's Gospel: "Behold I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Holy tradition is a continuum, neither bound by the pressures of secularism nor interrupted by the ignorance which pursues the drive for a misplaced impoverishment of Liturgy. Fr Robert Taft in his book, *Beyond East and West* has these wise words to help us:

Practice is determined not by the past, but by tradition, which encompasses not only past and present, but theological reflection on both...tradition is not the past; it is the Church's self-conscious now, of that which has been handed on to her not as an inert treasure but as a dynamic inner life.<sup>15</sup>

We are all confronted with the challenge of savage secularism. Russian Orthodoxy faced this head on in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with the destructive forces of Bolshevism and atheism. Strangely, the Soviet regime misjudged their onslaught against the Church because it did not understand that, even if the voice of the church was silenced the voice of God, proclaimed in the services of the Church could not be silenced. The Soviet regime permitted some restoration of worship from 1942 onwards, tightly controlled by the state but it did not realise the power of these

---

<sup>13</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Taft, *op. cit.*

services to proclaim God's presence. Active participation was simply being present in the church for the presence of God to be encountered and the soul to be nourished and restored.

This is not so much a lecture but a series of reflections on the true purpose of the Divine Liturgy in East and West. Somehow, we must hold onto the treasure we have been given as custodians. St Leo the Great tells us:

"What the Saviour did visibly in His earthly ministry has now passed over into sacrament."<sup>16</sup>

So these sacraments are conveyed in a sacred and holy treasury which you and I call holy tradition. This is not conservatism, it is something to do with a living tradition of conveying the numinous, the Divine Presence. Contemplation of the Divine Presence, adoration, worship are all elements that cannot be excluded and are actually essential to the rites. The rite itself conveys our Saviour, Jesus Christ as St Leo the Great tells us; after the glorious Ascension of our Saviour "what until then was visible was changed into a sacramental presence. The faithful are led to behold Christ with the eyes of faith...this is now how His Presence is encountered."<sup>17</sup>

As the priest in the Byzantine Rite empties the remaining gifts into the chalice after Holy Communion, he says this wonderful and exquisite prayer never heard at this particular moment by the faithful with which I conclude these reflections.

Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, let us worship the holy Lord Jesus, the only Sinless one. We venerate Thy Cross, O Christ, and we praise and glorify Thy Holy Resurrection; for Thou art our God, and we know no other beside Thee; we call upon Thy name. come all ye faithful, let us venerate Christ's holy Resurrection! For behold, through the Cross joy has come into all the world. Let us ever bless the Lord, praising His Resurrection, for by enduring the Cross for us, He hath destroyed death by death.<sup>18</sup>

May God bless us and keep us and may the light of His countenance shine upon us and be merciful unto us.

---

<sup>16</sup> St Leo the Great, Sermon 74.2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Priest's service book of the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom (Jordanville: Holy Trinity Publications, 20??).