



Saint Nicholas Cavasilas'

## Interpretation of the Divine Liturgy

### Preliminary remarks

The Divine Liturgy is the center of the Orthodox worship. It is the greatest Mystery of our Church, the mystery of Christ's presence among us. Therefore it remains always, along with the other sacraments, the foundation of true life of every faithful Christian.

**Saint Nicholas Cabasilas** (Άγιος Νικόλαος Καβάσιλας), the great mystic theologian of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, introduces us masterfully to the spiritual realm of the Divine Liturgy.

### Brief biography of the Saint:

**Saint Nicholas Cabasilas** (or Cavasilas) was born in Thessalonica around 1322. He was raised Christian by his pious mother, who after her widowhood (1363) became a nun. She received her well-rounded education from his uncle, scholar Nilus Cabasilas, who later became bishop of Thessalonica (1361-1363). He was nurtured spiritually in the hesychastic circles of his birthplace, directed by the disciple of St Gregory the Sinaite, Isidore, later Ecumenical Patriarch (1347-1349).

For about seven years (1335-1342) in Constantinople he studied philosophy, theology, rhetoric, law, mathematics, and astronomy.

He found himself in his birthplace again during the years of the revolution and dominance of the Zealots (1342-1349), taking active part in the political developments, as well as in 1363-1364, for family matters. He spent the rest and greater part of his life in Constantinople. There, apart from his occupation in civil service where among other duties he served as consultant of emperor John VI Cantacuzene (1347-1355), he engaged in further studies and authorship. Finally he withdrew from the world and became a monk, perhaps also a cleric. He reposed in peace after 1391, most probably in the Magganon monastery.

During the ripe final period of his life, holy Cavasilas authored his main spiritual works, "**Commentary on the Divine Liturgy**" and "**The Life in Christ**", two of the brightest pieces of Christian literature. A composition of select excerpts of the first (chosen by the Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, Oropos - Greece) is presented in the following text.

## INTRODUCTION

The essential act in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy is the transformation of the offerings of the faithful – bread and wine – into the body and blood of Christ. Its aim is the sanctification of the faithful who through Holy Communion receive the remission of their sins, the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven and every spiritual benefit.

Contributing to this act and aim are the prayers, psalms, readings from Holy Scripture, and everything that is done and said during the Liturgy. Through this we can picture the entire life of Christ from the beginning to the end, because **the consecration of the Gifts - the sacrifice itself** - commemorates the death, resurrection, and the ascension of the Savior since **it transforms these precious Gifts into the very Body of the Lord, that Body which was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended into Heaven.**

The acts which precede the sacrifice reveal the events which occurred before the death or the Lord. Namely His coming on earth, His public appearance, miracles and teaching. Those which follow the sacrifice symbolize the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, the return of people back to God, and their communion with Him.

The faithful who attend church and participate in all of these attentively, grow steadfast in faith and become more fervent in reverence and love for God. Thus prepared, they become ready to approach the fire of the solemn mysteries with confidence and trust.

This is, in short, the significance of the Divine Liturgy. Let us now examine it as far as possible in detail, starting with what occurs during the Holy Prothesis.

## **PROSCOMIDE**

### **The Holy Gifts**

The bread and wine that the faithful offer for the liturgy and which symbolize the body and blood of the Lord are not placed initially upon the altar but are first placed on the **Holy Prothesis**<sup>1</sup> and dedicated to God as **Holy Gifts**; that is henceforth their name.

We offer to God bread and wine because they are exclusively human food, by which our life is preserved and also symbolized. That's why it is believed that when someone offers food it is like offering life itself. Therefore, because through the Holy Mysteries God gives us eternal life, it was natural for our gift to be life in some way, so that our offering is not incongruous with God's reciprocation but has something in common. Besides, the Lord commanded that we offer Him bread and wine and He then gives us in return "heavenly bread" and "chalice of life." He wants us to offer food of our temporary life and He offers back the eternal life; so that His grace appears as a reward, and His infinite mercy as an act of justice.

### **Remembrance of the sacrifice on the cross**

After the priest takes in his hands the bread from which he will cut the sacred portion that will be changed into the body of Christ, he says: "In remembrance of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ." These words refer to the whole Liturgy and correspond to the commandment Christ gave when He delivered the mystery of the Holy Eucharist: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

But what is this remembrance? How will we remember the Lord in the Liturgy and what will we narrate about Him? Perhaps those things that showed Him to be God Almighty? That he raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, ordered the winds to subside, that He satisfied thousands of people with a few loaves? No, Christ did not ask to remember these, but rather the things that reveal weakness; the Crucifixion, Passion, Death. This is because **the passions were more necessary than the miracles. The passions of Christ cause our salvation and resurrection while His miracles only demonstrate that He is the true Savior.**

After the priest says the words "In memory of our Lord..." he performs acts that symbolize the crucifixion and death. He cuts with the knife the bread, reciting the prophecy: "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living." (Isaiah - 53:7-8)

After placing on the paten the Sacred portion (lamb) he cut, he adds the words: "The Lamb of God is sacrificed, He who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) Then the priest curves a cross on the bread thereby showing the means by which the sacrifice was made: the Cross. Then with the knife that is shaped like a lance, he pierces the right side of the Lamb and says: "One of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear". And pouring wine and water into the Chalice he continues: "and immediately blood and water came out". (John 19:34)

### **Commemoration of names**

The priest continues the Proskomide (offering). He takes small pieces (portions) from the other loaves and places them on the paten as holy gifts, saying for each one: "To the glory of the all-holy Mother of God" or "In honor of such and such a saint" or "For the remission of the

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<sup>1</sup> Holy Prothesis: Special area to the left of the Altar table, where the gifts offered (proskomide) by the faithful for the Holy Eucharist are placed. This is where their necessary preparation is done by the ministering priest.

sins of the living and the dead”.

What do these signify? Giving thanks to God and making supplication. For by our gifts we are either showing gratitude to a benefactor for what we have received already, or we pay homage to someone asking for a favor. Likewise, with the gifts offered to God, the church thanks Him for the forgiveness of sins and the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven for her saints. The church also supplicates for the same benefits to be given to her children that are still living as well as to those that have passed away without sure and certain hope of obtaining the Kingdom. That is why she commemorates first the saints, then the living, and finally the dead. For the saints she gives thanks, and for the rest she intercedes.

### **The covering of the Holy Gifts**

The words and actions performed over the bread which signify the death of the Lord are only descriptions and symbols. **The bread remains bread and has just become a gift to be offered to God, symbolizing the Lord’s body in His early age.** This is why the priest relates and represents over the bread the miracles accomplished in Him when He was a new-born in the manger. Placing what is known as the asterisk over it, he says: “And lo, the star stood over where the child was” (Matthew 2:9). Afterwards, the priest covers the paten and the chalice with fine veils and censes them. Thus the power of Christ was veiled up to the time of His miracles and God’s witness from Heaven. After the proskomide is complete, the priest comes to the altar, stands before the Holy Table, and begins the Liturgy.

## **THE DIVINE LITURGY**

“Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” With this doxology the priest starts the Liturgy. This is because when grateful servants approach their Master, first they praise him, and then they make their petitions for their affairs. And what is the first petition of the priest?

### **The iredicon (peace)**

“For the peace from above and the salvation of our souls”. When he says “peace” he not only means that we shall be at peace with each other and not bear any ill-will, but that we shall be at peace with ourselves so that we are not condemned by our own hearts. We always need the virtue of peace, but especially during prayer because without it one cannot pray properly nor expect something good to come of his prayer.

Next we make petitions for the church, for the state and the rulers, for those in danger and for all the people in general. And we do not only pray for the things of the spirit but also for the necessary material benefits – “For healthful air, abundance of the fruits of the earth...” because God is the Creator and Provider of all things, and we should always look to Him.

For every petition of the priest, the faithful just repeat one phrase: “Lord have mercy”. To beg God’s mercy is to ask for His Kingdom. Therefore the faithful content themselves with that supplication; because it encompasses everything.

Afterwards, chants begin which contain:

### **Antiphons**

Being God-inspired words from the prophets, the antiphons act as a purification and preparation for the holy mysteries. At the same time they also remind us of the first stage of Christ’s coming on Earth, when He was not known to the multitude and therefore needed the prophetic writings. But when later He appeared, He no longer needed the prophets since John the Baptist witnessed to His presence.

### **The Small Entrance**

During the chanting of the third antiphon, the Gospels are brought in accompanied by a procession with candles. The Holy Book is carried in by the deacon, or by the priest if no deacon is present. The priest, before entering the sanctuary stands in front of the Holy Gates, and prays that God will send His holy angels to escort him to the altar and offer sacrifice with him and take part in the praise of the Lord. Next he raises the Book of Gospels high, showing it to the faithful and after entering the sanctuary he places it on the Altar Table.

**The raising of the Gospels symbolizes the manifestation of the Lord when He began to appear to the multitudes. For the Gospel represents Christ.**

Now that Christ is revealed, no one pays attention to the words of the Prophets, therefore after the Little Entrance we chant about things related to the new life that Christ brought. We glorify Christ Himself for all He has done for us. We also praise the all-holy Mother of God or other saints depending on the feast or the saint honored by the church each time.

Finally we praise the Triune God Himself chanting "Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us". "Holy, Holy, Holy" is the hymn of the angels (Isaiah 6:3), and "God", "strong", "immortal" are words of prophet David: "My soul hath thirsted after the strong living God" (Psalm 41[42]:3). **We chant the Thrice-Holy Hymn after the bringing in of the Gospels to proclaim that with the coming of Christ, angels and people are united and henceforth comprise one Church.**

Immediately after, the priest asks everyone to not stand lazily but focus on the things that will follow. This is the meaning of "proschomen" (let us attend). And by also saying "Wisdom" the priest reminds the faithful of the wisdom with which they should participate in the Liturgy. It is the good thoughts that occupy those rich in faith and removed from human sentiment. We really need to attend the Liturgy with appropriate thoughts if we want to avoid wasting our time. However, since this is not easy, we need our own attention as well as the external reminder, so that we refocus our mind which is constantly forgetful and carried away into vain cares.

In addition, the call "Orthee" (rise/stand) contains an exhortation; to stand eagerly before God, with reverence and zeal, and the first token of this zeal is the upright posture of our body.

After these pronouncements, **the Apostolic and Gospel readings take place. These represent the manifestation of the Lord** as it was gradually occurring after His first appearance to the people. **During the little Entrance, the Gospel was closed, representing the course of time of the first 30 years or the Lord, when He was still silent.** But now that the scriptures are read we have His fuller revelation, with everything that He taught publicly and all that He commanded the Apostles to preach.

### **The Great Entrance**

Soon the priest will proceed to the sacrifice and the offerings to be sacrificed must be placed on the holy table. Therefore he comes to the Prothesis, takes the holy gifts holds them up head-high and exits the sanctuary. He walks in a solemn and slow procession around the nave of the church amidst the faithful surrounded by candles and incense. Finally he enters the altar and places the offerings on the holy table.

While the priest walks by the people, the faithful chant and kneel reverently praying that they will be remembered when the offering is made. For they know that there is no supplication more effective than this awesome sacrifice which has freely cleansed all the sins of the world<sup>2</sup>.

**The Great Entrance symbolizes the journey of Christ to Jerusalem where He was to be sacrificed.** As He was riding an animal, He entered the holy City escorted and praised by the crowd.

### **The Symbol of Faith (Creed)**

The priest now calls the faithful to pray "for the precious gifts set forth": "let us pray to the Lord for the sanctification of the precious gifts we are about to offer, so that our initial goal is fulfilled".

Then, after he adds other petitions, he prompts everyone to have peace amongst them ("peace be to all") and love ("let us love one another..."). Since brotherly love is followed by the love of God and our perfect and living faith in Him, therefore immediately afterwards we confess the true God: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Trinity one in essence and undivided".

The priest completes: "The doors, the doors, in wisdom let us attend". By this he means: "Open wide all the doors i.e. your mouths and ears to the true wisdom, namely every high teaching and belief for God. Say and hear these continually, and even with zeal and devotion".

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<sup>2</sup> A characteristic liturgical element of the Great Entrance is the **Cherubic Hymn**, which is chanted slowly by the choir: "Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim and sing to the life-giving Trinity the thrice-holy hymn, now lay aside every care of life, that we may receive the King of all, invisibly escorted by the angelic orders. Alleluia."



Then the faithful recite aloud the Profession (Symbol) of Faith (“I believe in one God...”).

### **The Holy Anaphora (Oblation)**

The priest against exhorts: “Let us stand aright, let us stand with fear; let us attend, that we may offer the Holy Oblation in peace”, meaning: “Let us stand firmly on what we confessed by the Creed, without being thrown off balance by heretics. Let us stand with fear, because the danger of being deluded is very great. Thus standing firm in faith, let us offer our gifts to God in peace”.

At this point, the faithful should bear in mind the Lord’s words: “If you bring your gift to the altar and remember that someone has something against you, first reconcile with him and then come to offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). After the priest raises the souls and thoughts of the faithful from the earthly to the heavenly things, he begins the thanks-giving prayer. In this manner he imitates the first Priest, Christ, Who gave thanks to God the Father before instituting the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

The priest now glorifies God and praises Him along with the angels. He offers thanks for all the gifts He has bestowed on us from the beginning of time. He thanks Him especially for the coming of His only-begotten Son into the world and for handing us the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. He even recites the story of the Mystical Supper, repeating the Lord’s own words: “Take, eat... Drink of this all of you...” (Matthew 26: 26-27).

After the priest says: “Remembering, therefore, this command of the Savior, and all that came to pass for our sake, the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the enthronement at the right hand of the Father, and the second, glorious coming”, he concludes with the exclamation: “We offer to You these gifts from Your own gifts in all and for all, we praise You, we bless You, we give thanks to You, and we pray to You, Lord our God.”

With these words it is as if he is saying to the heavenly Father: “**We offer to You the same offering that Your only Begotten Son Himself offered to You, God and Father.** And by offering it we thank You because also He by offering it thanked You. We are adding nothing of our own to this offering of gifts, because these gifts are not our works but Your creations. Neither is this way of worship our invention, but You taught it to us and You motivated us to worship You in this manner. **Therefore, all we offer You is entirely You own ...**”.

At this time the priest prostrates himself and prays fervently. He prays for the gifts before him, that they will receive His most holy and all-powerful Spirit and be transformed – the bread into His holy Body, the wine into His immaculate Blood.

When these words have been said the whole sacred rite is accomplished! The gifts are consecrated! The sacrifice is complete! The great victim and oblation, slain for the salvation of the world, lies before our eyes upon the altar. For it is no longer the bread which until now has represented the Lord’s Body; it is the same most holy Body of the Lord which suffered the insults, the blows, the spitting, the wounds, the gall, the crucifixion. In like manner, the wine is the same Blood that gushed when that Body was being slain. It is that Body and Blood formed by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, which was buried, which rose again on the third day, which ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father.

And we believe that is so, because the Lord Himself said: “This is my Body ... this is my Blood ...” (Mark 14:22,24). He Himself commanded the Apostles and the whole church to: “do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). He would not have given them the command to repeat this Mystery unless He had been going to give them the power to perform it. And what is this power? It is the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit who through the hand and tongue of the priests consummates the Mysteries. **The celebrant is a servant of the grace of the Holy Spirit,**

**without offering anything of his own. That's why it does not matter if he happens to be full of sins himself. This does not adulterate the offering of the gifts, which are always well pleasing to God.** Likewise, a medicine made by a person who is not a doctor does not lose its healing properties, as long as it was made according to the instructions of the doctor.

When the sacrifice has been thus completed, the priest, seeing before him the pledge of God's love of mankind, the Lamb of God, gives thanks and supplicates. He thanks God for all the Saints, because in them the church finds what it seeks – the kingdom of heaven. Especially – “exceptionally” – he gives thanks for the most blessed Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, since she surpasses all saints in holiness. The priest also supplicates for all the faithful – the living and the dead – because they have not reached perfection yet and still have need for prayer.

### **Holy Communion**

Shortly after, the celebrant will himself commune, and will also invite the faithful to the holy mysteries. Since holy communion is not permitted to everyone, the priest, elevating the Bread of Life and showing it to the people, cries: “The holy things to the holy”. It's as if he says: “Here is the Bread of Life! You see it. Rush then to partake it. Not everyone however, but whoever is a saint, because the holy things are only allowed for the saints”. By saints he means not only those who have attained perfection but those also who are striving for it without having yet obtained it. That's why Christians, unless they fall into mortal sins that separate them from Christ and make them spiritually dead, have no obstacle to Holy Communion<sup>3</sup>.

When the priest says “The holy things to the holy”, the faithful respond aloud: “One is Holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father”. For no one has holiness of himself; it is not the feat of human virtue, but derived from Christ by everyone. It is as if we were to place mirrors beneath the sun; each would shine and send forth rays of light, so that one would think there are many suns; yet in truth there is but one sun which shines in all; just so Christ, the only Holy One, pours Himself forth upon the faithful, shines in so many souls, and gives light to many saints; yet He alone is Holy.

When he has thus summoned the faithful to the sacred banquet, the priest receives communion himself first, followed by the other clergy in the altar. But before this, he pours **warm water into the chalice, which symbolizes the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church.** Since this warm water both is water and contains the element of fire because it has been boiled, it signifies the Holy Spirit which the Lord likened to “living water” (John 7:38) and came down upon the Apostles in the form of fire on Pentecost.

Next the priest turns towards the people, and, exhibiting the Holy Mysteries, calls to those who wish to receive communion to approach “with the fear of God and faith”, without contempt for the humble appearance of the body and blood of the Lord, but recognizing the preciousness of the sacrament and believing that that is the source of eternal life to those that receive it.

The body and blood of Christ is true food and true drink. And when one partakes of them **these do not convert into human body like regular food does, but the human body converts into them.** Just like iron, when it touches the fire it becomes itself fire and does not convert the fire into iron.

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<sup>3</sup> Besides, the Divine Liturgy is done for the faithful to receive communion. As St Basil the Great says, “for someone to commune and partake every day of the holy body and blood of Christ, is good and beneficial”. However, frequent Holy Communion presupposes continuous spiritual struggle and suitable preparation (repentance-confession, guidance by a spiritual father, etc).

Of course, **we receive Holy Communion into our mouth, but first it enters the soul** and that is where our joining with Christ takes place like the Apostle Paul says: “But he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him” (1 Corinthians 6:17). **Without joining with Christ, man is of his own the old man who has nothing in common with God.**

What does Christ ask of us in order to sanctify us through the Holy Mysteries? It is the cleansing of the soul, faith and love of God, ardent desire and longing for Holy Communion. These draw sanctification close, and that is how we should commune, because many are those who come to the mysteries and not only do they not benefit, but actually return with greater sins.

### **Dismissal**

After the faithful take communion, they ask that the sanctification which they have received may remain with them, and that they will not betray the grace, nor lose the gift. The priest now calls them to thank God with zeal, for the Holy Communion. That is why he says: “Rise (orthē)... let us worthily give thanks to the Lord”. Not therefore lying down or sitting, but raising soul and body to Him. The faithful then glorify God who is the origin and dispenser of every blessing, with words of Scripture: “Blessed be the name of the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore” (Psalm 112[113]:2). After this hymn is chanted three times, the priest exits the altar, stands before the people, and says the final prayer: “Christ our true God...”. He thus asks of the Lord to save us by His grace, since we have nothing to show worthy of salvation on our own. Hence, he commemorates as intercessors many Saints and especially His most Holy Mother.

Finally, the celebrant distributes the antidoron, which is bread that has been blessed as it comes from the original bread that was offered to God for the Holy Eucharist. The faithful take the antidoron reverently, kissing the right hand of the priest. For this hand, just moments ago, touched the all-holy Body of Christ, received sanctification from it, and transmits it to those who kiss it.

At this point the Divine Liturgy reaches its end, and the mystery of the Holy Eucharist is completed. Because the gifts we offered to God have been sanctified, they sanctified the priest and they imparted their sanctification to the rest of the fullness of the Church.

For all of this then, unto Christ our true God, is due all glory, honor, and worship, together with His unoriginated Father and His all-holy Spirit, both now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

*Sources:*

- *Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, Attiki (selection of excerpts).*

- *“A commentary on the Divine Liturgy”, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press.*

More Texts in English (Interesting texts of this site in English):  
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