

# Symbolism and Realism in Orthodox Worship

## Introduction

The problem we shall address in this article might be described as follows:

(a) The whole of our worship, culminating in the Divine Eucharist, is interwoven with symbolism. There is not a single act of worship or liturgical action in our Church that is performed without the use of some or other symbol. Why is this, and what is the theological justification for it?

(b) The very notion of “symbol” contains the problem of the symbol’s relationship with reality, or, more accurately, with truth. There is no such thing as a symbol which does not imply simultaneously two things: that the symbol *is not fully identified with the reality or truth*, and that the symbol *is not entirely foreign and unrelated to the reality or truth*, but participates in it in a certain sense which has to be explained and pinpointed. The symbol is a form of paradox: it at once is not and is the reality.<sup>1</sup>

(c) Precisely because of this paradox intrinsic to the notion of symbol, the worship that makes use of it, particularly to the extent that ours does, runs the risk of being identified with *magic*. How does symbolism differ from magic? For many Christians, perhaps not at all. It is not fortuitous that Protestantism opposed and virtually abolished symbolism in worship, precisely because it had seen the tendency in Western Christianity during the Middle Ages to introduce magical notions into Church life. Such notions often make their appearance among Orthodox too. For this reason, there is no shortage of people who would be happy to see the worship of our Church simplified as much as possible. The Roman Catholics gave into this way of thinking at the Second Vatican Council, and decided to shorten and simplify the Mass, except for certain solemn or “pontifical” Masses; to do away with the rich vestments of the celebrants and replace them with simple white vestments, etc. How many Orthodox would not honestly like something similar to happen in our Church? The long services, the rich vestments, and the varied symbolism are seen by many as incompatible with the

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<sup>1</sup> The way the symbol is referred to by St. Cyril of Jerusalem sometimes as identical with the truth and sometimes not is characteristic. Thus he writes about baptism: “What a strange and paradoxical thing; we did not truly die; we were not truly buried; we were not truly crucified and raised up; but the imitation was in an image, while the salvation is in truth” (*Mystagogical Catechesis*, 2.5). Yet further on, referring to chrismation, he writes: “You should know that the symbol of this chrism is to be found in the Old Testament. . . . But these things happened to them in a type, whereas for you this is the beginning of your salvation not in a type, but in truth. . . .” (*Mystagogical Catechesis*, 3.6).

“spiritual” character of Christian worship, the simplicity of Jesus’ earthly life, the virtue of humility, etc. Add to this popular piety with its extreme, almost magical manifestations, and the problem of symbolism assumes grave dimensions even in our Church. There is in our Church a latent psychological gulf between the “intellectuals” and “conscious” and “enlightened” Christians on the one hand, and the simple believers on the other, and every so often this comes to the surface.<sup>2</sup> It is essential, then, for our theology to pose and deal with the question of symbolism in our worship; how can it be justified theologically, and how can we avoid falling from the Scylla of magic into the Charybdis of rationalism?

## I. The notion of symbol

The notion of symbol is not an invention of the Christian Church. It is a notion intimately related and inseparably bound up with that of transcendence, which to varying degrees accompanies every form of religion. The existential source of the symbol is the need in some way to bridge the gap between finite and infinite or, in our Orthodox terminology, between created and uncreated. This bridging cannot be achieved except by using the means afforded by the finite and created world, which in essence are nothing other than material and corruptible things. Even if one wants to avoid matter in bridging the gap, one will still have recourse to means which are created, and of necessity limited and inadequate, such as human reason, which the ancient Greeks used par excellence and whose inadequacy was demonstrated by the apophaticism of patristic theology. Words too, then, are symbols—something distinct from the truth. But the utter silence to which mystics often resort is equally a symbol—distinct from the truth and borrowed from our finite and created being since it has to do with human feelings such as passion and love, which the mystic borrows in order to bridge the gulf between created and uncreated. So there is no relation between man and God—even if that God is within the world—which does not have need of the symbol.

The symbol, then, in its function as a bridge between the world and God, *participates* in both these realities. The degree of participation may vary from case to

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<sup>2</sup> The question of chanting the scriptural readings in worship is related to this. From time to time, the view is put forward in the Greek press that these readings should be rendered in a speaking voice and not sung, the argument being that this makes them more understandable for the people. Indeed, some clergy in our Church already use this manner of reading the Epistle and Gospel during the Divine Liturgy, precisely for this reason. But is this right? Is there perhaps a theological reason which requires that the readings should be chanted? Why, for instance, does the *Typikon* provide for the readings at Vespers to be chanted when they are from the New Testament, but simply read when they are from the Old Testament? Contrary to the prevailing view, the *Typikon* with all its details is not a mere “formality,” but has theological content. It is as well, then, before we adapt the *Typikon* to our practical common sense, to seek out the theological reasons behind it. See below, footnote 214.

case, but in order to be called a symbol it has to *bring together* (the etymological meaning of the Greek verb συμβάλλω); it must participate in what is symbolized. The distinction made by Paul Tillich<sup>3</sup> between “sign” and “symbol” is characteristic: a sign is something that points to a reality without necessarily participating in it, while a symbol is something that participates in the reality it symbolizes. Also important are the remarks of the late Alexander Schmemmann<sup>4</sup> concerning the misunderstanding of the notion of “symbol” even among Orthodox: a symbol has come to mean something different from or even opposed to reality, which leads to the arbitrary interpretation of liturgical symbolism and contempt for the “formalities” of the liturgical *Typikon* on the part of academic theology (see above, footnote 187).

If, however, we define the symbol as the means of linking the created with the uncreated, the here-and-now with the beyond, experience with truth, by ways and means which are necessarily borrowed from the created here-and-now, then we need to seek the theologically correct Christian meaning of the symbol in the very nature and manner whereby the gulf between created and uncreated is bridged *in the person of Christ*. This is where we should locate the specific difference between Christian and non-Christian notions of symbol. And only in this way shall we understand the significance of symbolism in our Orthodox worship.

## II. Symbolism in the Christian faith

The fundamental difference between the biblical faith and pagan religions as to bridging the gulf between created and uncreated lies principally in the fact that pagan religions, which ontologically confine God within the world, bridge the gulf with the aid of *nature*, whereas in biblical faith nature on its own has no capacity or property of bridging the gulf; instead of being bridged with the aid of nature, this gulf is bridged only through the intervention of the *person*. Thus in pagan religions, the symbol that unites the created and the uncreated makes personal freedom in a certain way subject to natural necessity (hence magic among primitive peoples, or the motion of the stars or the symbolism of the natural ages among the ancient Greeks: for example in Aristotle, Plato, the Eleusinian Mysteries, Fate among the Stoics, etc.); whereas in biblical faith, bridging the gap between created and uncreated depends solely on personal freedom—that of God in the first place, and in the second place that of man formed in his image as a creature with free will. Thus neither in the Old Testament nor in the New Testament does there seem to be a symbolism connected with nature (“observing days, and months,

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 265.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), pp. 30ff.

and seasons, and years,” as St. Paul writes dismissively to the Galatians).<sup>5</sup> Biblical faith has as a bridge between created and uncreated the person, in other words freedom as love.

This precisely is the basis for the Incarnation of the Word, and it is on this basis alone that Christian symbolism can be grounded. The Son and Word of God, this *Person* which is “one of the Trinity,” in other words a hypostasis of loving relationship, *freely* takes up the created and bridges the gulf. If this had not happened, no symbolism would be possible: the created and the uncreated would remain separated by an unbridgeable gap. But since the Son of God has become man and become flesh and the gulf is bridged, symbolism has become possible; but under certain inviolable conditions, which would never allow us to lapse into natural symbolism. These conditions are as follows:

(a) No symbolism can be based on any form of correspondence between created and uncreated characteristics. Nor is the intelligible or rational world able to symbolize or provide an image of the invisible God. Only what the Son of God has *freely* chosen as a means of bridging the gap between created and uncreated is able to become a means of symbolism. And this choice on the part of Christ should not be interpreted or understood as dependent on properties of the created, because then it would not be free.

(b) Since no symbolism can be based on natural properties but only on personal freedom, all symbolism in the Church is based on historical events, because *historical events* alone are realities of personal freedom.

(c) Given that all historical events receive their meaning not from the past but from the future, the ultimate source of every symbolism is the *eschatological event*, the Kingdom of God. Each symbol is justified only to the extent that it images the eschatological reality. This is where the truth of the symbol is to be found: not in the nature of the materials used, nor simply in reference back to events of the past, but in the participation of the symbol in eschatological reality.

Let us now see how these basic principles are applied in Orthodox worship.

### III. Symbolism in Orthodox worship

The worship of the Church begins in its fullness from the Lord’s Resurrection.<sup>6</sup> With the Resurrection, the bridge between created and uncreated begun at the

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<sup>5</sup> Gal. 4:10.

<sup>6</sup> Before the Resurrection of Christ, Christian worship was not “in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23) since “as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39). The Spirit who is given by the Risen Christ initially to his disciples (John 20:22), and through them to the whole Church, renders Christian worship “spiritual,” bringing the “last times” into history (Acts 2:18).

Incarnation is brought to completion. The veneration of the risen Christ by his disciples and the worship offered to him as “Lord,” seated at the right hand of the Father after his Ascension, form the axis of Christian worship. The meals which the disciples eat with the risen Lord give meaning to the Mystical Supper,<sup>7</sup> and become the first form of the Divine Eucharist. All these things happen because the Resurrection is an *eschatological* and not simply an historical event. It marks God’s final act in history, the victory over the “last enemy” which is death, and the dawning of the “last day.” This “last day,” which became a reality for the last Adam, will at the Second Coming become a reality for all creation. What does all this mean for symbolism? *It means that since the Resurrection, the symbolism of worship no longer moves between the natural and intelligible worlds or simply between events of the Old and New Testaments, but principally between the Resurrection and the Second Coming.* Let us explain what this means.

If we rule out, as we must, the notion of symbolism as a correspondence between the natural and intelligible worlds, and for reasons already given base our symbolism on the correspondence between *historical* events, then we have before us two categories of symbol. One is that which connects the symbolism used in worship with historical events *of the past*. The other is that which connects worship with “events” *of the future*, in other words with the last times. All the symbolism in the Church’s worship has these two poles, and it is these that give it its theological meaning.

The first pole (connection with historical events of the past) could be called *typological*.<sup>8</sup> Danielou, in his well known work *The Bible and the Liturgy*, gives an excellent exposition of this subject. The worship of the Church was from the beginning full of typological characteristics: Baptism had its Old Testament types in circumcision, the Red Sea Crossing, the Flood, etc. The same applied to the other mysteries and rites. Two theological conclusions may be drawn from this. First, that no symbolism in worship referred to nature and its properties. For instance, the water of Baptism did not refer to water’s natural property of cleansing (even though it easily lends itself to such symbolism, this symbolism is nonetheless avoided). It refers instead to historical events. And this is significant. Also characteristic is what St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes about the exorcisms preceding Baptism: the words of the priest expel the demons for no other reason than that they are drawn from Scripture.<sup>9</sup> The power of the symbolism does not

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:30ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 1.3: “Pass aCross then, please, from the old to the new, from the type to the truth.”

<sup>9</sup> *Procatechesis*, 9.

lie in any natural property (e.g., the holiness of the cleric who breathes upon the candidate, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

The second theological conclusion is that typological symbolism never refers to the past, but always to the future. Thus Baptism is not a type of the Flood, but the Flood is a type of Baptism, etc. In worship, nothing leads us to the past, except to refer us through the past to the future.

The second pole of symbolism is precisely that which moves between the Resurrection, and the future in its eschatological form. This symbolism (the presence of which Danielou failed to discern—perhaps because it requires antennae which only Orthodox worship affords) might be called *iconological*.

We shall need to give this particular attention, because it has a particularly close connection with Orthodox worship.

In contrast to “type,” the term “image” or “icon” is used by the Fathers principally to denote states and events of the New Testament and not the Old. The exception is the writers of the Alexandrian School, Clement, Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea, who also refer to things in the Old Testament as “images.”<sup>11</sup> The author of the Areopagitic writings, in keeping with his general approach, uses “image” for the correspondence of earthly worship with heavenly.<sup>12</sup> But St. Maximus the Confessor, in an extremely interesting corrective, without appearing to disagree with Dionysius, transfers the whole subject of imagery in the Divine Liturgy from the historical plane to the eschatological. So while Dionysius regards the Divine Liturgy as an image of the heavenly Liturgy, Maximus alters his position by interpreting it as imaging the Kingdom *which is to come*.<sup>13</sup> This is why he very characteristically gives this epigrammatic

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<sup>10</sup> References to natural properties are not wholly absent—such as the connection of the west with darkness when the baptizand turns from the west to the east during the exorcisms (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 1.4). But the weight of the symbolism clearly falls on the historical events: “Pass a Cross then, please, from the old to the new, from the type to the truth. There Moses was sent by God into Egypt; here Christ is sent forth by the Father into the world. There, it was to lead the oppressed people out of Egypt; here, Christ comes to deliver those in the world who are worn out by sin. There the blood of a lamb turned away the destroyer; here the blood of the spotless Lamb Jesus Christ has been made a healing of the blood offered to demons. . . .” *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 1.3.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, 4.22; Origen, *On John*, 10.16; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eccles. Hist.*, 1.3.4.

<sup>12</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 1.3; *Divine Names*, 4.4.

<sup>13</sup> *Scholium on Dionysius the Areopagite, On the Church Hierarchy*, 3.2: “From the effects. That is, from what is accomplished visibly to the things that are unseen and secret, which are the causes and archetypes of things perceptible. For those things are called causes which in no way owe the cause of their being to anything else. Or from the effects to the causes, that is, from the perceptible symbols to what is noetic and spiritual. Or from the imperfect to the more perfect, from the type to the image; and from the image to the truth. *For the things of the Old Testament are the shadow; those of the New Testament are the image. The truth is the state of things to come.* “The fact that these *Scholium*, which the manuscript tradition transmits with those of John of Scythopolis (between 535 and 560 AD), faithfully reflect St. Maximus’ theology, is clear from the latter’s *Mystagogy*, in which

summary: “the things of the Old Testament are the shadow; those of the New Testament are the image. The truth is the state of things to come.” And John of Damascus echoes Maximus; although he sometimes uses the term “image” in reference to things in the Old Testament, he hastens to explain, following the Apostle Paul (Heb. 8:5), that “the Law was not even an image, but the foreshadowing of an image.”<sup>14</sup>

All this means that symbolism as “typology” and symbolism as “iconology” are two different things. The notion of an icon requires particular attention. The subject of icons is a very broad one and cannot concern us in detail here.<sup>15</sup> We shall confine ourselves to just a few remarks.

(a) In contrast with a shadow or a type, an icon is grounded in the truth of the New Testament, in other words in realized rather than expected Christology. As the supporters of the icons maintained during the iconoclast controversy, the fact that Christ has become human mandates the making of icons, for no other reason than that it has made the Son of God himself an historical reality.<sup>16</sup> It is significant that in iconographic depiction, the emphasis falls on historicity and not on conceptual symbolism or typology. The fact that the Quinisext Council prohibits the representation of Christ as a lamb, on the grounds that this does not correspond to historical reality,<sup>17</sup> shows that when symbolism in the Church is iconic, it cannot but be historical.

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all the rites performed in the Divine Liturgy form an image of the Kingdom which is to come. For more on this, see our articles “The Eucharist and the Kingdom of God,” in *Sourozh*, Nos. 58, 59, 60 (especially No. 58, pp. 5ff. and 10ff.)

<sup>14</sup> *In Defense of the Holy Icons*, 1.15. 15.

<sup>15</sup> See Leonid Ouspensky, *The Theology of the Icon*, trans. Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> See John of Damascus, *In Defense of the Holy Icons*, 1.8-16: “It is clear that when you see the bodiless one become man for your sake, then you will make an image of his human form, When the invisible becomes visible in the flesh, then you will make an image of the likeness of him who is seen. When he who is without body and without shape . . . takes the form of a servant and limits himself so as to take on size and quality and clothes himself in bodily form, then draw a picture of him who has deigned to be seen, and display it to be looked at. Draw his ineffable condescension, his birth from the Virgin, his baptism in Jordan, his transfiguration on Tabor, his sufferings which have freed us from passion, his death, his miracles, the symbols of his divine nature. . . . Of old, God who is without body and without shape could in no way be represented in an image. But now that God has been seen in the flesh and walked among men, make an image of the visibility of God.”

<sup>17</sup> This prohibition appears in the well known 82<sup>nd</sup> Canon of the Quinisext Council (692 AD), which is of crucial importance for the notion of the icon: “In certain reproductions of the venerable images, the Forerunner is pictured pointing to the Lamb with his finger. This representation was adopted as a symbol of grace. It was a hidden figure of that true Lamb who is Christ our God, shown to us according to the Law. Having thus welcomed these ancient figures [types] and shadows as symbols of the truth transmitted to the Church, today we prefer grace and truth themselves, as a fulfillment of the Law. Therefore, in order to expose to the sight of all, at least with the help of painting, that which is perfect, we decree that henceforth Christ our God be represented in his human form and not in the ancient form of a lamb. We understand this to be the elevation of the humility of God the Word, and we are led to remembering his life in the flesh, his passion, his saving death and, thus, the

(b) In contrast with the state of things to come, the icon is distinct from the truth, not because it is a falsehood or a delusion or a fantasy, but because it borrows its means of expression from nature which is still corruptible. Thus the whole notion of an icon depends quite literally on the notion of person and the distinction between person and nature. If the icon is not a lie or a fantasy, despite not being the truth, this is possible because of the fact that the person does not depend on the nature. Thus we can have a *personal* presence without having a *natural* presence. St. Theodore the Studite expresses the distinction between nature and person in respect of the icon in these words: “When anyone is depicted in an image, it is not the nature but the hypostasis that is depicted. . . . So Christ is circumscribed according to his hypostasis, even though he is uncircumscribed in his Godhead.”<sup>18</sup> “And we call Christ’s image ‘Christ’ . . . The icon of Christ is nothing other than Christ, *apart, of course, from the difference in essence.*”<sup>19</sup>

Thus with the help of the distinction between nature and person, we can understand the relationship between symbol and truth (between symbolism and realism) in this way: an image is personal presence *without* the nature; the truth is personal presence *with* its nature. Thanks to the Incarnation and especially the Resurrection, the state between the New Testament and the last times allows personal presence, in other words the preservation of the person, but only in view of the resurrection of the body, i.e., of its natural presence. Until that time, the person in a certain sense borrows nature which is still corruptible, and in this way it is able to be present. Without this borrowing, the communion of the historical Church in the eschatological is impossible. Those who reject the use of images as a personal presence reject the very possibility of prayer and worship in an Orthodox manner. Worship without images is an exercise in psychology, the most flagrant self-deception and illusion.<sup>20</sup>

#### IV. Iconic symbolism in worship

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deliverance which took place for the world.” Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Vol. I, trans. Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), pp. 92-93.

<sup>18</sup> *Antirrheticus*, 3.1(34) (PG 99.405). The distinction between nature and person and the connection of the notion of the icon with that of the *person* is so important that, for St. Theodore the Studite at least, the whole argument against the iconoclasts depends on the notion of the person. This should be an answer to those who belittle the central place of this notion in Orthodox theology.

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*, 3.3 (14) (PG 99.425).

<sup>20</sup> The tendency to regard the liturgical life of the Church (which by definition involves imagery) as a form of inferior spirituality “for the simple faithful” in comparison with mental prayer, makes the whole of the Church’s theological struggle for the holy icons meaningless. “So if Christ does not manifest Himself in the icon, in this respect he is inactive and ineffectual; and to think that is absurd” (Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus*, 3.4, PG 99.432).

Given that iconic symbolism in the Liturgy is, as we have seen, a matter of personal presence and not of natural presence, nature participates in it only in a secondary way and to the degree that it is hypostatized in the person. Thus place, time, matter, colors, speech, smell, hearing, etc., are used in symbolism; not, however, as the source of the symbol—the sources are always personal and historical-eschatological—but as borrowings to express the personal presence. Let us look at some examples.

The color red naturally suggests blood. It is thus natural for it to be used symbolically, for instance for clerical vestments on feasts of the martyrs. Indeed, it has become the practice in the Church of Russia to use this symbolism, and the same can be seen also among some Greek priests. Theologically, this means that the symbolism has its source in nature, not in history or in the person. It is consequently very close to pagan symbolism, and to the representation of Christ as a lamb forbidden by the Quinisext Council. The distinctions are subtle, but important. If the color white is used as a symbol of purity, then we have a symbolism which is pagan in inspiration. If it is used because that is how Christ is described at the Transfiguration, or the angels at the empty tomb, etc.—in other words, in reference to history and to persons—then the source of the symbolism is not some property of nature but a personal, historical event. But not even in this case can the color be binding, because iconic representation is not simply historical, but eschatological.

The veneration of icons, the recognition of supernatural properties in holy relics, sacred vessels and objects, and so forth can become forms of paganism, if these objects are regarded as possessing these properties in their *nature* and not in the personal presence of the saint with whom they are connected.<sup>21</sup> It is in consequence a dangerous view (shared by many Orthodox) that the divine energies somehow reside in the nature of these sacred objects, if we do not simultaneously stress the *personal* character of the divine energies. The divine energies are always *hypostatic*, and what sanctifies is the personal presence of the saint and not the physical contact of the object with the divine energies (impersonally and in themselves). I consider that the theology of divine

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<sup>21</sup> “I do not venerate matter, but the Creator of matter,” John of Damascus, *op. cit.*, 1.16. Similarly Theodore the Studite, *op. cit.*, 3.4 (11): “The image is with the archetype, and with the archetype the image is present and is seen and venerated. It is not at all that the essence becomes identical, but the likeness becomes one, and in respect of the likeness there is one unified veneration toward both, *not divided according to the difference of natures*” (PG 99.433). The same Father is still clearer at other points in his *Antirrheticus*: “Nor is the nature of the icon venerated, even though the person depicted is seen in it. And yet *in respect of the identity of the hypostatic likeness*, the veneration is identical, in accordance with the single, complete similarity between the two” (3.4 (7), PG 99.432). “Inasmuch as the icon is similar to the prototype, so it partakes in all the veneration relating to the prototype; it does not take with it the material in which it is exhibited for veneration. For this is the nature of an icon, that it is identified with the prototype according to its likeness to it, but *differentiated* according to the principle of its essence” (3.4 (6)).

energies, if it is not clearly linked with that of hypostatic energies<sup>22</sup> and generally with the notion of the person, can lead straight to paganism.

But the iconic symbolism in our worship is not concerned only with things and objects. All the *movements* and *actions* in worship are also icons and imagings, together with *those who perform them*. We shall confine ourselves to the Divine Eucharist, since this is the epicenter of all worship and it is here above all that the question of symbolism is decided.

The Divine Eucharist is not just one thing, one object, the “holy things” (the precious Gifts changed into the Body and Blood of Christ). It is an action, a work, a *function* [the everyday meaning of *λειτουργία* in Greek—*Transl.*]. And this point is decisive for the notion of symbolism. All the patristic commentaries on the Divine Eucharist, from Maximus to Cavasilas, approach the Divine Eucharist as a *liturgy*, a *synaxis* and an *image*.<sup>23</sup> In the Divine Liturgy, everyone and everything is an image of something: the church building represents the space of the Kingdom of God, with Christ the King surrounded by the saints. The bishop represents Christ seated on the throne, as he will be in his Kingdom. The priests represent the Apostles who surround the bishop Christ on the *synthronon* [*σύνθρονον*, a raised seat in the apse with places for the bishop and priests—*Transl.*]. The deacons represent the angels who, as “ministering spirits sent forth to serve” (Heb. 1:14), move between the people and the clergy. The people gathered together in one place and bringing the gifts (bread, wine, oil, etc.) express the scattered people of God, which in the Kingdom of God will come together around Christ and, as the crown of creation, will bring with them the whole of the material world to be sanctified and saved as well. And all this iconic symbolism is not a static tableau but a movement in time, containing within it the historical time of salvation. Thus the bishop as another Christ does not simply sit on the throne; he *comes*. His entrance into the church is a great liturgical event (though who is aware of this?<sup>24</sup>)

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<sup>22</sup> The significance of the hypostatic character of the divine energies in the theology of St. Gregory Palamas is demonstrated in the doctoral thesis of S. Yiangezoglou, *Communion in Deification. Christology and Pneumatology in the Theology of St. Gregory Palamas* (Thessaloniki, 1995; in Greek).

<sup>23</sup> In contrast to modern academic theology, Orthodox included, which sees as the central and virtually exclusive theme of the Divine Eucharist the Lord’s words of institution and the change in the Gifts (cf. the accurate criticisms of A. Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, pp. 30ff.), ancient commentators on the Liturgy see the Eucharist principally as a *Synaxis* (a technical term for the Eucharist in Sts. Maximus, Germanos, Anastasios of Sinai, *et al.*), and make the *whole* of its ritual and symbolism a subject for theological examination.

<sup>24</sup> Either through ignorance of the enormous significance of this matter or from ill-conceived simplicity and “humility,” some of the bishops of our Church today, when they are going to celebrate the Liturgy, do not come into the church by the main entrance where the clergy and people await them, but by the “back door” of the altar, almost unnoticed, there to vest and come out at the Great Doxology in Matins, so that they can go into the altar once again at the Little Entrance. This totally destroys the meaning of the Entrance, which for the Fathers of the early Church had a vital theological significance. As to the related question of the bishop’s vesting outside the

because it images the coming of Christ into the world at both his first and his Second Coming, and his reception by the clergy and people at the entrance of the church is the reception of Christ: “Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ. . . .” All the ancient commentators on the Liturgy see the Liturgy as an image. More than all the others, St. Maximus sees everything that is performed as an image of the Kingdom. After the readings and the closing of the doors once the catechumens withdraw, everything from then on images future events of the Kingdom: the Creed represents our eternal thanksgiving for all that God has done for our salvation. The kiss of peace represents the eternal mingling of souls in the communion of the Kingdom, etc.<sup>25</sup> Later commentators give greater weight to the imaging of events in Christ’s earthly life, and thus the eschatological orientation of liturgical symbolism is gradually attenuated.<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Cabasilas, influenced by the climate of his age, begins already to think in scholastic terms, making the Eucharistic Anaphora an image of the sacrifice of Christ,<sup>27</sup> which earlier had been placed at the Proskomide, and earlier still (Theodore of Mopsuestia)<sup>28</sup>

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altar and not entering the altar before the Little Entrance, see our comments in “The Eucharist and the Kingdom of God,” Part I, *Sourozh*, No. 58, 11.

<sup>25</sup> See Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogy*, 8ff.: “The first entry of the bishop into the holy church during the sacred synaxis is a type and image of the first coming of the Son of God, our Savior Jesus Christ, into this world through the Incarnation. After this coming, his ascent and restoration to heaven and to his throne above the heavens is figured by the entry of the bishop into the sanctuary and his ascent to the priestly throne. . . . The divine readings of the most sacred books indicate the divine and blessed wills and intentions of God All-holy. . . . The spiritual enjoyment of the divine chants signifies the vivid delight of the divine blessings. . . .” From the moment of the reading of the Gospel, which images “the end of this world,” with the dismissal of the catechumens and the closing of the doors, we find ourselves in the space of the Kingdom which is to come, where everything that is performed symbolically expresses things to come, our eschatological communion in the blessed life of the Trinity through our adoption as sons. Thus the Eucharist becomes an icon of the Kingdom of God and a foretaste of joy and gladness (cf. Acts 2:46).

<sup>26</sup> For more detail see H.-J. Schultz, *The Byzantine Liturgy: Symbolic Structure and Faith Expression*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1986), especially pp. 184ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>28</sup> See R. Taft’s exceptionally interesting work *The Great Entrance: A history of the transfer of gifts and other pre-anaphoral rites* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1978), especially pp. 35ff. A point of great theological interest to come out of Taft’s study, and earlier that of Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945), pp. 288ff., is that in the time of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), the entrance with the Gifts images the procession with Christ *already sacrificed* (during the Preparation?), going to be buried on the Holy Table. “This will eventually lead,” Taft comments, “in the Byzantine tradition at least, to the interpretation of the Liturgy as culminating in the Resurrection from a passion or sacrifice accomplished before the Liturgy has even begun” (p.37). The theological problems posed in this case are significant. Clearly in the East, the moment of the Anaphora does not seem always to have been identified with the sacrifice on the Cross, as happened in the West (and in modern Orthodox theology). This explains why for Maximus and other Byzantine writers, the actions following the Great Entrance image events of the Resurrection and the Kingdom, and not of Golgotha. This is most likely the explanation for the popular reverence traditionally shown at the Great Entrance, at which, according to the Cherubic Hymn, we receive “the King of all.” (The reading ὑποδεξόμενοι, “about to receive,” instead of ὑποδεξάμενοι, “having received,” by which many people try to solve the problem, is of little help, since we are dealing with a reception taking place *at that moment*.)

at the preparation of the Gifts before the Great Entrance. Prior to Cabasilas, Germanos of Constantinople and Theodore of Andida, especially the first, still largely echo Maximus, but the trend of iconic symbolism is clearly getting ever further away from eschatology, whether in the direction of a correspondence between the earthly and the heavenly, or toward the representation of past events, though always those of the New Testament. All these strands are somehow synthesized in the work of Symeon of Thessaloniki, who borrows from Maximus, Germanos and Theodore, composing a detailed symbolic interpretation of the church buildings, as well as the rites performed in them and the ministers performing these rituals. Symeon's works bears witness to how thoroughly iconic symbolism had permeated Orthodox liturgical life toward the end of the Byzantine era. But what remains of all this today?

## V. A look at the situation today

If we take a look at the state of affairs in the Orthodox Church today, what we observe is, generally speaking, as follows:

1. The form of the Liturgy and all the services is preserved with almost complete faithfulness and exactitude. The centuries of Turkish domination were a time of conservatism. Thanks to this period, the Divine Liturgy has come down to us basically as it took shape in Byzantium. There were just some small changes, as the symbolism of the emperor's participation in worship was transferred initially to the Patriarch and then to all bishops.

2. Even from Byzantine times, changes had begun which were later consolidated and still apply regarding matters which had an indirect and destructive influence on the iconic symbolism of the Liturgy:

(a) The *skeuophylakion* [σκευοφυλάκιον, in which holy vessels and vestments were kept—*Transl.*] disappeared as a special building or compartment of the church, with the result that the bishop and the other clergy now vest inside the altar, and thus the Little Entrance with its important symbolism disappears. For the same reason, the Great Entrance has essentially been done away with too, since now everything begins in the sanctuary and comes back to the sanctuary in a circular movement. The disappearance of the Entrances destroyed the iconic symbolism, depriving it of the linear movement from history to the last times and thus reinforcing the imagery of "place" [i.e., earthly Liturgy as an image of heavenly Liturgy—*Transl.*], already present in the Areopagite and later commentators on the Liturgy.

(b) The distinction between episcopal and presbyteral Liturgies, which was marked in the earliest centuries (second-fourth centuries), disappeared (cf. already Symeon of Thessaloniki). The result was that the notion of the bishop as icon of Christ

was gradually lost from the Liturgy, and the episcopal Liturgy became simply more solemn and cluttered with pointless rubrics. Together with this the *synthronon* gradually fell into disuse, and the “stall” was made into the bishop’s throne; whereas even in the sixteenth century (cf. Hubert, *Archieratikon*) this was simply a seat next to the choir (cf. the term *χοροστασία*, lit. “standing at the choir,” to denote the bishop’s presence at the service) which the bishop used when he attended church at Vespers or at Matins before celebrating the Liturgy. With the loss of the *synthronon*, the iconic symbolism of the Kingdom of God in the Divine Liturgy was also lost.

3. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, which gradually ate its way into the Orthodox Church too, the iconic ontology broke down almost totally and was replaced by rationalism and individualism. The two last are incompatible with iconic ontology, because this ontology is predicated upon relatedness and the way one thing refers to another, transcending individualism and making the person the ontological category. Thus iconic imagery became symbolism of a psychological kind, and for rationalistic thought a purely metaphorical notion. To regard the bishop as an image of Christ became pious naiveté and nonsense, since you know very well that *as an individual* he is a human being with any number of imperfections and sins; to venerate icons and relics became something like superstition and magic. So we Orthodox have come to the point of not knowing what to do with our Liturgy and our Tradition. Those who kiss the icons or the priest’s hand do it out of habit, without knowing why, and under the mocking gaze of those who know better—and there are plenty of those in this Age of Enlightenment!

4. Again, under the influence of pietism, which has also corroded our Orthodox people as an offshoot of the Enlightenment, iconic ontology has been replaced by the *ontology of qualities* and the *psychology of the inner man*, with the result that liturgical symbolism is virtually useless, since the purpose of the Liturgy is not to participate in the communion of the last times, but to create moral examples useful to society or to serve the religious needs of man, who is looking for “peace,” “prayerfulness,” and so forth. The sermon is considered so important as a source of edification that it is transferred to the time of Communion, thus making havoc of the entire eschatological image presented by the Liturgy. Vestments are simplified to be more humble (“moral perfection” demands it). Simple, humble country chapels are preferred to light-filled cathedrals as being more prayerful. The apostolic and biblical readings are not chanted but read like ordinary texts, so as to become comprehensible to human reason.<sup>29</sup> Episcopal liturgies are only for

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<sup>29</sup> The question of whether scriptural readings in the Divine Liturgy should be chanted or simply read should not be divorced from the approach to the Divine Eucharist, eschatological or otherwise. Reading a text with a view to teaching and moral edification is radically different from reading it in a spirit of *doxology*. In the first case, the words are *grasped* and *comprehended* or “taken possession of” by human reason. In the second case, the words

feasts, etc., etc. Certainly there are still people—and many of them—who love the Church’s feasts and flock to celebrate them, as well as little old ladies—fortunately, there are still plenty of these too—who kiss priests’ hands, touch their vestments to receive grace, kiss the icons and holy relics with a faith that is almost “magical,” and generally preserve the traditions with piety. If they do not fall victim to wily clerics, these people are the only leaven, the little leaven available to us to preserve and restore iconic symbolism, purifying it from such magical tendencies as may exist. But in order for this to happen, we theologians and clergy have to rediscover the lost meaning of iconic ontology. A return to the Fathers without recovering the meaning of liturgical symbolism will get us nowhere; for in the Orthodox Church, the *lex credendi* has no meaning without the *lex orandi*. Only the rediscovery of iconic ontology will save us from both the paganism and the rationalism that lurk in our midst, each in its own way threatening the iconological symbolism of our Liturgy.

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“broaden out” (hence the chanting) so that they “grasp” and “take possession of” human reason. It is obvious that this second sort of reading (the doxological) flies in the face of rationalism, which demands that human reason should “take possession of” the truth. It is no accident that the demands for plain reading of scriptural texts arise at a time when the ambient cultural atmosphere is rationalistic, and the Church, having lost her awareness of the eschatological nature of the Liturgy, has turned it into a vehicle for teaching and edification, which naturally obliges her to undertake innovations such as plain reading of the scriptural lessons so that they are better “understood”—transferring the sermon from after the Gospel to before communion, when the church is full (so that more people can be *taught*), and similar—not to mention the grave danger in plain reading of a subjective element creeping into the delivery. This is a danger far more serious than the one usually remarked, that of the reader showing off his musical and vocal skill to the detriment of the meaning of the text when readings are chanted. It is obvious that the Church ought to train readers in the proper way to chant the scriptural lessons, rather than proceeding to abolish this practice.