

The Holy Liturgy – the Mystery and the Icon of the Eternal Life

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Abstract: The present study aims to show that participation in the Eucharistic Liturgy is a real entrance to the Supper in the Kingdom of Heaven and that the faithful can still participate in this Mystical Banquet of God's love in a mystical way by means of the seen ritual, icons and prayer. Through icons, through prayers, through the reading of the inspired word of the Gospel the faithful are initiated into the mysteries of the future life. They have a mystagogical finality as ways of sharing Christ which together reveal the dynamic presence of the Lord's sacrificial love in the Church.

Keywords: Liturgy, Icon, Eucharist, History of the Liturgy, Prayer, Gospel

From the beginning, the early Church was aware of the unseen, mysterious presence of Christ in her worship through the Holy Liturgy, in which there is the unveiled mystery of the prefiguration of bread and wine in the Body and Blood of the Saviour, the recapitulation of the whole iconomy of salvation in Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen, and the anticipated experience of the Kingdom of God as participation in the Liturgy of the eternal love of the Holy Trinity.²

In Greek, the term λειτουργία means common service of the people, a meaning indicated by the etymology of this word composed of two nouns: ἔργον, which means: deed, work, labour, occupation, and λήϊτος, which comes from λῆός or in the Attic dialect λαός, and which defines any public service. The verb λειτουργεῖν means to do something for the people, and λειτουργία was an action, a common activity, a common work, a work of a polis, a work of a city, a work of the people or a work done for the people.³

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² Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă*, Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1986, pp. 5-12.

³ Pr. Petre Vintilescu, *Liturghierul explicat*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 1972, p. 140.

The term is often used in this sense in both the Old and New Testaments⁴ but by analogy with the meaning the noun had in the ancient world, the term "Liturgy" came to define in early Christianity generically all cultic acts expressing both the thanksgiving or gratitude of the faithful people to God and God's sanctifying work for the people.⁵ Over time, however, the term came to define exclusively the making of the Eucharistic sacrifice.⁶

Patristic theology, however, has always understood this term in a broader sense as defining the communion of eternal love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity, with which all created beings are called to share by grace, a communion accessible to man in the Church through the grace and work of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Love between the divine Persons is the Liturgy in which the faithful participate through the acts of worship they see; it is the breath of life which created the world and which restores it and resides in a new form as Church, preparing it for the mysteries of the future life.⁸

For the Fathers of the Church, the true Liturgy is celebrated in Heaven, being the Last Supper of the eternal Kingdom in which the Altar, the Sacrifice and the Great High Priest is the Saviour Jesus Christ Himself, the Lamb slain in a state of continuous sacrifice before the Father. The whole creation is called to participate in this Feast of the love of the Holy Trinity. Being bound to the body in this world, the faithful can take part through the seen ritual of the Holy Liturgy in this heavenly Supper at which Christ eternally offers himself to the Father as an offering together with the offerings of the faithful.

"Through the Holy Liturgy we are constantly called to the Wedding of the Son of God, says Father Dumitru Stăniloae. The feast of the Son of God is not over. It continues in Heaven now, but also on earth through the Holy Eucharist. The most loving marriage between the Son of the Emperor and us is always taking place, we are always

⁴ In the Septuagint the verb "λειτουργεῖν" is used 42 times and refers exclusively to the cultic service to God. King Josiah says to the Levites: "You must now serve (λειτουργεῖν) the Lord your God and His people Israel" II Chronicles 35:3. This verb is also used in the New Testament with this meaning of service to God: Luke 1:8-10, Acts 13:2, Hebrews 9:21. The term λειτουργία appears in the Pauline epistles referring to the Savior's priestly service, as in Hebrews 8:2; 5:1. 4. See: Pr. Petre Vintilescu, *Liturghierul explicat...*, p. 140.

⁵ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of Liturgy*, London, 1945, p. IX; His Eminence Dr. Daniel Ciobotea, *Liturghie Euharistică și Filantropie creștină – necesitatea unității dintre ele*, în „Candela Moldovei”, an. XII (2003), nr. 10, p. 4.

⁶ Robert Taft (ed.), *Liturgy*, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 1240-1241.

⁷ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă, vol. II*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1978, p. 221. See also René Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la divine Liturgie du VII-e siècle*, Paris, 1966, p. 36.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 222.

participating in this wedding feast, we are moving towards the perfect marriage and feast of the future kingdom. We live under the dawn of eschatology preparing for the meeting with the all-shining Sun of the endless day.”⁹

In order to be able to share in the heavenly reality of the Kingdom Supper from this world, to draw us to Himself, to call us to the eternal joy of His love, the Saviour chose to dwell in us through the Holy Mysteries and to sow in us His new life of God. “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπὶς τῆς δόξης) the Apostle of the Gentiles joyfully announces to the Colossians [Col 1:27], showing that this mystical presence of the Son of God in us is the great mystery of Christianity, is the fulfilment of the icon of salvation and the foretaste of eternal life. This mysterious encounter with Christ in the “innermost, most hidden and most sincere chamber of the heart” (τὸ ἐνδότερον καὶ ἀπόκρυφον καὶ εἰλικρινές χώρημα τῆς καρδίας), as St. Mark Eremita says¹⁰, becomes operative and felt to the extent of keeping the commandments. This presence in our souls of the Savior who became Spirit after humanity grows in the ambience of the Church, and our union with Him is perfected by the life of asceticism and by penance. “Christ is dwelling in us and we feel the mystery of His presence and with Him we meet from now on within us, says Father Dumitru Stăniloae. The Son of God had to immerse Himself in human nature and die and rise again, so that we, immersed in the water of Baptism, can receive Him completely within us, or rather immerse ourselves completely in His divine life, share in all the gifts with which His human nature was filled through His Passion and Resurrection, and put them to work in the life of the Church.”¹¹

The great mystery of Christianity consists precisely in this unseen encounter with Christ within us, an encounter and communion which gives us the ability and the possibility to acquire pure sentiments and to recognize Him in the Eucharist, as the Holy Apostles did immediately after the Resurrection. Christ is the unseen life, the divine sap, planted in us through Holy Baptism, which does not, however, grow mechanically, but grows in the measure in which we assimilate it, or rather, in the measure in which we are assimilated to it, through free and conscious action, through the sacramental life and through the life of asceticism and self-denial.

As this spiritual presence of Christ grows in our souls, both *μυστικῶς*, i.e. through the Holy Mysteries, and *ἐνεργῶς*, by putting into practice the gifts received through the Holy Mysteries, we open ourselves more and more to the world to come, tasting even now the joy of eternal life. But all this is now taking place in the Church, where we

⁹*Idem, Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, pp. 5-12.

¹⁰ Marcus Eremita, *De baptismo* 4, 95, see text at: G.-M. de Durand, *Traités I* (=Sources chrétiennes 445), Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999, p. 322.

¹¹Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă, vol. III*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003, pp. 43-44.

partake of Christ not only through the Holy Eucharist, but also through all the cultic acts we see, through icons, hymnography, chanting and prayer. All these ways in which the unseen presence of Christ reveals itself and nourishes our souls are contained in the Holy Liturgy, for in the Eucharistic synaxis we really sit with Christ at the table of the Supper of His Kingdom, and all the visible acts, all the iconography, all the biblical readings, all the hymnography, all the prayers serve this uncreated mystery, all help us to taste this reality of eternal life, all are meant to cultivate our spiritual senses, to open us to the mysteries of the world to come.¹²

In what follows we will discuss two of the most important ways in which the Church prepares us to enter the Last Supper of the Kingdom of Heaven: through icons and through prayer.

1. The liturgical function of the icon

The participation at the Liturgy and the Eucharistic communion with Christ are making the souls of the faithful capable to have an interior, spiritual vision of the world, and the visible witness of this vision is represented by the icons, creations of liturgical life which speak without a voice, “of a Reality ever living and unchanging, a reality which, in all the discretion of silence, quietly resurrects something deep and unifying all in man”.¹³

The icon introduces us to the atmosphere of the eternal joyful supper in the Kingdom of the future age. Through it, the space of the world is transfigured: there is no longer the perspective that places us in the position of external spectators. We are called to the wedding through the whole iconographic program of a church. We see through icons the whole world from the perspective of the eschaton. “History is interpreted differently, says Archimandrite Vasilios Gondikakis. The events of the divine iconomy are not past and closed, but present and active. They embrace us, they save us. In the icon we do not have a neutral historical fidelity, but a dynamic liturgical transformation... the events of salvation are not interpreted historically, but initiate us into the mystery by being incorporated liturgically: they intertwine each other. They become a witness to another, eternal life that has broken the bonds of wickedness. They call us to a spiritual banquet. Now and here.”¹⁴

This inner perspective of seeing the world that the icon proposes also helps us to understand that at every Holy Liturgy we are invited along with all the saints to the

¹² Pr. Prof. Ioan Ică, *Modurile prezenței personale a lui Iisus Hristos și a împărtășirii de El la Sfânta Liturghie în spiritualitatea ortodoxă*, Pr. Prof. Mircea Păcurariu, Diac. Ioan Ică jr, (eds.), *În Persoană și comuniune. Prinos de cinstire Părintelui Profesor Academician Dumitru Stăniloae la împlinirea vârstei de 90 de ani*, Editura și tiparul Arhiepiscopiei ortodoxe Sibiu, 1993, p. 341.

¹³ Vasilios Gondikakis, *Intrarea în Împărăție*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2007, p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

heavenly supper of the eternal Lamb sacrificed for us. “The door to the Last Supper has not closed. The freshness of Pentecost has not passed, and entering into the wedding feast we dare to ask the Lord: ‘Today the Son of God receives us as partakers of your holy supper’¹⁵. We enter into the Kingdom feast both topographically (τόπος), by stepping into the ecclesiastical tabernacle, and, above all, tropographically (τρόπος), as a way of existence, by changing our lives, by cleansing ourselves from our sins and by acquiring the spiritual senses. The icons in the Church tell us exactly where we are, where we are entering if we look at them with the eyes of the soul cleansed of our passions: we are at every Liturgy at the heavenly supper, where “all are illumined by another, uncreated light, and with other, spiritual senses, we see through the unclouded illumination of the iconography, the light of the future age... Here all are blessed, rejoice and leap for joy. All are filled with uncreated joy. Here we find ourselves outside and beyond the turmoil of these changes, just as we find ourselves beyond the warmth of the sun and the moon. We find ourselves in the serenity of the new heaven and the new earth, outside the created light and the enclosed space.”¹⁶

The icon, like the Gospel, therefore has a liturgical and mystagogical function. It introduces us to the mysteries of the future life through its unique message and unites us with its Prototype. The icon is not only divine beauty re-presented artistically, not only an initiation into the Mystery of God’s presence in this world, but it is itself the place of a graceful presence, a unique ambience of the encounter between the created and the uncreated, between God and man. The painting and adorning of the church with icons therefore has a mystagogical purpose, for in the context of the Holy Liturgy, the mystical encounter with the persons represented in the icons is an initiation and a preparation for a fuller encounter with Christ through the reading of the Gospel and the reception of the Holy Eucharist. Both through the word and through the images in the icons, God the Incarnate Christ is present, and we are prepared by the Church through the prayers and through the icons in the Church for the supreme encounter with Christ in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist.

“If the Liturgy is the advance with Christ, Who leads us through His saving works to the transformation of bread and wine into His Body and Blood... then He and His works must dominate the main space of the church, surrounded by angels, or having His Blessed Mother nearby,” says Fr Dumitru Stăniloae.¹⁷ The main, multi-represented theme of the icons is Christological, or the saving work of Christ, which began with His historical deeds and continues to be fulfilled now, extending throughout the Liturgy, to apply to those who believe and come to meet Him now in the Church. The Transcendent is descended and descends through the whole universe of persons saved in the past, is

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

¹⁷ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, pp. 70-71

present and at work in the angelic world, that which, as it surrounds Him, surrounds us, is present in His Blessed Mother and in all the saints, radiating through all of them upon us. The heaven of the saints, of the angels, the heaven which signifies the presence of Christ and of the Holy Trinity in them, is united with the earth, for the transfiguration of the whole seen creation. The prayers of those united with those of the faithful rise together to Christ, Who is above them, but also in them, Who receives them and presents them to the Father in the heaven of heavens, in the altar above the heavens, culminating in His sacrifice. The prayer and song of the faithful, from which the Spirit of Christ is not lacking, is strengthened by looking at the icons, which lifts the mind beyond them to Christ Himself, surrounded by His angels and saints.”¹⁸

The icon is apophatic, as the whole Liturgy is apophatic, because it unites the past with the present and the eschatological future. It is a window to the world to come, allowing the beholder to encounter through contemplation and prayer the living reality, beyond the senses, of eternity. The whole Liturgy is an icon of the Kingdom of Heaven, a foretaste, even in this world, of the happiness of eternal life. “In the Liturgy, the evangelical word of Christ and His iconic image meet to reveal together the dynamics of the same divine life in the unique work of love. To penetrate the sacramental horizon of the icon is to understand the whole Liturgy as the mystery of the Kingdom of God, and this understanding is possible only in the light enclosure of the Church as the full and unique mystery of salvation, shared with us in the love of the Most Holy Trinity.”¹⁹

If by nature and by vocation man is himself an “iconic” creature and therefore a sacramental being, it means that he needs the work of the sacraments and the meanings of symbols, which mediate his experience of unseen realities and his communion with these realities. Through the intercession of the icon, a truly personal relationship is established between the praying Christian and the mystery or person represented iconographically. This is why Orthodoxy affirms the “diaconal” role of sacramental acts as well as of the icon, which is to serve - through the sanctification of the human heart and mind - the ever fuller incarnation of the Kingdom of God in the most concrete realities of the world.

2. The Word of the Gospel and prayer as ways of sharing Christ

Our entrance into the Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven and our call to the eternal Last Supper of Christ is accomplished in the Liturgy through icons, Bible readings, prayer, and all the acts of worship in general.

A special role in our initiation into this new world of God's eternity is played by reading the words of Holy Scripture. The Word proclaims and prepares the Mystery of the Preface. “The Word gathers the Church to become incarnate in her,” says Father

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

Alexander Schmemmann. By severing the Word from the Sacrament, the Mystery is threatened to be understood as magic, and the Word without the Sacrament is threatened to be reduced to doctrine. The Mystery is precisely the interpretation of the Word, for the interpretation of the Word always testifies to the Word which becomes Life... The Mystery is precisely this testimony and, therefore, in it is the source, the principle and the basis of the interpretation and understanding of the Word, the source and the criterion of theology. Only in this inseparable union of Word and Mystery can we truly understand the meaning of the statement that the Church alone preserves the true meaning of Scripture. Therefore, the first part of the Liturgy is a necessary beginning of the holy work of the Eucharist, it is that Mystery of the Word which will find its fulfilment and culmination in the gathering, sanctification and distribution of the Eucharistic gifts to the faithful.”²⁰

From the beginning, the liturgy has had at its core *the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation* as a way not only of proclaiming the teaching of the crucified and risen Christ, but above all as a way in which God works on the faithful, revealing His will to them and calling them to communion with Himself. In the Liturgy, the Word of God is first and foremost action, personal intervention, an affirming presence that brings about and fulfils what it proclaims in the hearts of those who listen. Through the word of the Gospel the Person of Christ penetrates the being of the person to whom it is addressed, reveals Himself to him, calls him, claims him, penetrates him and changes him. “In God’s word to us,” says Father Dumitru Stăniloae, “His love for us is made known and felt, but not without awakening our love for Him. Through prayer we express our dependence and affection for Him, but not without also feeling His love’s response to it. Through both we are introduced into the spiral of endless movement in communion between us and God.”²¹

God’s Word is the gift that commits. It not only defines the frameworks of man’s happy existence with God, but the knowledge and fulfilment of it seals a new chosen people, creates a communion to such an extent that the same inspired word becomes God’s revelation and at the same time man’s praise and thanksgiving.

Prayer is thus the response of believers to the hearing of the Word of God, to the call of Christ, by which Christians show that through blessing, thanksgiving and petition they feel Him present within them as a You who speaks to them, calls them, engages them. It is “the word of God assimilated into the being of believers”, “a means of living more deeply the presence and work of the sacrificed and risen Christ, a fire that kindles and lifts up our being to Heaven as a sacrifice and becomes the flame that springs from

²⁰ Pr. Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist – The Mystery of the Kingdom*, translation by Pr. Boris Răduleanu, Anastasia, Bucharest, 1992, p. 74.

²¹ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 94.

the warmth of faith, brought into the soul by the Holy Spirit through the word”²², as Father Dumitru Stăniloae says.

Prayer follows the word, but the word also follows prayer, enriched and warmed by it, for through it we experience God's boundless love, shown in the incarnation, sacrifice, resurrection and ascension of Christ and in his coming to us through his holy Spirit. Prayer is increasingly enkindled from the word, and the word is increasingly and deeply illumined from prayer.²³

The interpretation of the word of God proclaimed through the Gospel is another way in which Christ speaks and works in the Liturgy. The sermon and homily have the function not only of explaining and revealing the endless depths of the divine word, but above all of warming the prayers of the Liturgy by explaining and initiating the faithful into the mystery of God's presence in the worship of the Church.²⁴ The words of the priest have a mystagogical role. They are meant to introduce the mystery, the mystery of human communion with God, the profound meaning of the sacramental acts, to open the souls of the faithful to an understanding and a sense of God's work in the Liturgy, and to prepare them for the great encounter with Christ in the Eucharistic communion.

Significantly, in the Liturgy there is a gradual increase in our sharing of God's word, and its maximum effectiveness is shown in the Eucharistic epiclesis, which “produces the highest degree of feeling God's presence”²⁵ by the coming of the grace of the Holy Spirit through the gestures of the priest upon the bread and wine to make them into the Body and Blood of the Saviour. Here we see the indestructible link between Word and Sacrament in the Orthodox Liturgy, for its every gesture and word is filled with the power and work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in the whole Eucharistic rite Christ is present and working in various degrees and ways together with the Holy Spirit, for, “where there is not only the word about Christ, or of Christ, but also his work in hearts... there is also the Holy Spirit. The word is Christ's, but the power to penetrate into hearts, to transform matter, is through the Holy Spirit”, according to Father Dumitru Stăniloae²⁶.

3. Holy Liturgy - school of prayer

Orthodoxy is doxological, says Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, and it lives and affirms itself in and through its liturgical tradition, through this living and personal dialogue of the Church with Christ,²⁷ “through which the faithful live concretely and intensely the feeling that they are under the rain of the gifts or uncreated works of the Holy Spirit,

²² *Ibidem*, p. 96.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

²⁴ Ιωάννης Φουντούλης, *Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐν τῇ θείᾳ λατρίᾳ*, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1965, pp. 7-13.

²⁵ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 98.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

²⁷ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1..., pp. 40, 43.

with which they are filled in proportion to their faith and with which they gradually partake in proportion to their spiritual growth.”²⁸ Tradition is the very life of the Church, it is her unwritten and unspoken teaching, it is her experience of ages, preserved in silence, perceived and lived by Christians, crystallized in Holy Scripture, in hymnography and in all the ordinances of worship as the fruit of the permanent presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the Church.²⁹

All worship, all prayers, all our conversation with God are fruits of the ecclesial tradition, and they arose and developed in the life of the Church in the early centuries, first in the private sphere, and then, from the 4th century onwards, this private worship became public, but with three distinct modes of manifestation: purely monastic, cathedral and mixed, as Robert Taft puts it.³⁰ In all three forms the new Christian cultic rites developed from an initial core of psalmody, biblical hymns and prayers, and then included a rich hymnography as well as a series of cultic acts developed over time.

The Liturgy is also a crystallization of Tradition. First celebrated by the Saviour at the Last Supper, and then repeated at His command by the Holy Apostles and their followers, the Christian Liturgy is based on the ritual structure of an ordinary Jewish dinner held in a Passover context, on the basis of which the Holy Apostles articulated a series of prayers based on psalms and Old Testament biblical songs. This gave rise to the first prayers of the Liturgy, which from the 4th century onwards came to be written down, thus giving rise to the first collections of euchological texts. The liturgical tradition of the Church has made the whole ritual of the Eucharistic Synaxis a veritable prayer book. The Church has sought to teach us continually how to speak to Christ and his saints once we have entered the Supper of the Kingdom of Heaven. Everything that comprises the liturgy is the Church's age-long experience of prayer, and when we participate in the Eucharistic Sinax we are not only entering the heavenly banquet of the Saviour, but we are invited to enter a true school of prayer. In this unique setting in which we sit with Christ at the table of His Kingdom, He speaks to us through the words of Scripture and teaches us how to pray by giving us through the Book of Psalms and the words with which to address Him, so that our communion with Him may be complete. The Psalms form the basis of our prayers and hymnody, for they are the inspired word which is both revelation, revelation of God in what He desires for us, and praise and thanksgiving and confession and petition which we bring to Him. The fact that the same inspired words by which the Creator of all shows us what His will is for us can and must become the words with which we praise, thank and ask Him is the premise from which

²⁸ Idem, *Cultul Bisericii Ortodoxe, mediu al lucrărilor Sfântului Duh asupra credincioșilor*, în „Ortodoxia”, nr. 1 (1981), p. 7.

²⁹ Idem, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1..., p. 22.

³⁰ Robert Taft, *Quaestiones Disputatae in the History of the Liturgy of the Hours: The Origins of Nocturns, Matins, Prime*, Worship 58 (1984), p. 130.

the Liturgy starts to create a perfect communion of our communion with God. This is why the Eucharistic Liturgy begins with the singing of the antiphonal psalms, and then with the singing of the biblical Trisagion to create the communion of our sharing in the Word of God. The Eucharistic communion is also prefaced and prepared by the liturgical anaphora, in which praise and thanksgiving to the Father for the whole icon of salvation is based on the blessing-gratitude-prayer structure taken from the chanting of the psalms.

“The psalm is the voice of the Church, the work of angels, heavenly life and spiritual fragrance”, as St. Basil the Great says³¹. Uniting divine revelation with human melody, the psalm is the typos and paradigm after which Christian hymnography and euchology are fashioned. Full communion with God arises not from our narrative praise, thanksgiving and petition, but from the spiritual depths of the Holy Spirit-inspired words that poetically comprise our liturgical texts. Our prayers do not use the mystical ambience of speaking with God as a context in which all our requests and desires can be expressed in detail, but through inspired words, united with the divine melody of liturgical chant, they provide our souls with spiritual levers to deepen personal prayer when we participate in any Church service. The private prayer made by each of us at home is rooted in community prayer and draws all its strength from this communion of ours with God and with our neighbours.

In the Liturgy we find ourselves in this school of prayer that unites us with God and our neighbour in community. Prayer enables us to taste together the happiness and joy of being with all the saints at the Saviour's Supper in the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus the whole Liturgy becomes a silent movement of our community in the sacrificial spirit of Christ towards our full union with Him and towards our mutual offering to one another in the power of His sacrifice. “This is one with the ascent into the fullness of love,” says Father Dumitru Stăniloae. It is equivalent to our entry and advancement into the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity. It puts a seal of sacrifice out of love on our whole life, becoming a whole Liturgy in the broad sense.”³²

The Eucharistic liturgy transforms our whole life into a perpetual liturgy, through which our salvation is worked out, as St. Maximus Confessor states: “the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is always invisibly present, but especially and especially during the Holy Liturgy, truly prepares, transforms and reshapes each one of those present, residing him in a more divine way, according to his own characteristics, and raising him to those things which are indicated by the mysteries which are being celebrated, even if he does not feel, if he is still of the children in those after Christ, and cannot see the depth of what is being celebrated. He activates in him the grace of salvation, indicated by each of the divine symbols that are being performed, leading him one by one and according to an

³¹ St. Basil the Great, *Homiliae super Psalmos*, PG 29, 213A.

³² Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune...*, p. 139.

order of those close to him to the final end of all... For at the end of all there is the communion of the Mysteries with the most holy and life-giving Mysteries, which make those who partake worthily in its image and like by grace and participation to the Good in essence, not lacking in any way in Him, gods by grace, because the whole God fills them completely and leaves nothing in them empty of His presence.”³³

Experiencing these heavenly realities in practice, each of us can understand this astonishing and everlasting exhortation left to posterity by the same great holy father in the end of his Mystagogy: “Let us not, therefore, fail from the Holy Church of God, which contains in the holy ordinance of the divine symbols performed in her so many mysteries of our salvation, by which she, moulding after Christ each one of us who spends his life especially well according to his own measure, brings forth in perfection, according to Christ, the gift of intification given by Holy Baptism in the Holy Spirit; but with all power and boldness to show ourselves worthy of the divine graces, by well pleasing God through good works...”³⁴

Following the research, a few conclusive considerations are in order:

1. Patristic theology has defined the Liturgy as the communion of love of the Holy Trinity given to man through creation and restored after the fall into sin through the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Saviour. Believers can participate in this eternal banquet of God's love from this world through the visible ritual of the Holy Liturgy.

2. The Church Fathers have tried to explain the presence of Christ in the Liturgy in all its depth and complexity. Christ, indwelt in the hearts of the faithful through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, gives them new life and new feelings through which they acquire a spiritual vision and relationship by which they can recognize the Saviour and share him in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

3. Through the icons and the Gospel believers are initiated into the mysteries of the future life. They have a mystagogical finality as ways of sharing Christ which together reveal the dynamic of the presence of the Lord's sacrificial love in the Church.

³³ Saint Maxim the Confessor, *Mistagogia*, trans. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, în "Revista Teologică", XXXIV (1944), no. 7-8, pp. 347, 343-344 (PG 91, 701D; 704A; 697 A).

³⁴ *Ibidem*, PG 91, 712B.