



The Liturgy & The Return of Christ

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

How can there possibly be any connection between the Sunday Liturgy and the return of Christ? The answer is very simple. The very purpose of the Liturgy (or Eucharist) is to prepare us

for the Second Coming. Considering that our very eternity is at stake. The aim of that liturgical service is to blot out all of the personal sinfulness and guilt we may possibly be carrying.

We attend this sacramental rite in order to get purified and cleansed of all of our sins that could otherwise make the Second Coming or our death (whatever happens to come first) a day of divine wrath, rather than a day of joy and celebration. This implies that the Blood of Jesus in the Communion Cup “washes us of all sins.”

It is obvious therefore, that receiving Communion each time we attend the Eucharist (Liturgy) is of utmost importance. Apart from the Communion our attendance is meaningless and of no benefit to us. You might as well stay home, if you are not planning to partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By receiving the Lord in the Communion in repentance and inner brokenness, we secure the forgiveness of our sins and maintain a right relationship with God. It helps to keep our name written in the book of life. Our name will not be blotted out because of our sins.

“Take, eat. This is my body which was broken for you for the remission of sins.” “Drink of this all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant which was shed for you and

*for many for the forgiveness of sins.”
“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

Till the day Jesus returns in glory we need continuously to receive of the precious Body and Blood of Christ. It is a necessary provision that will enable us to be found acceptable by the Lord when we face Him. St. Paul spelled it out for us when he said: “*For as often as ye eat of this bread and drink of this cup, ye declare the Lord’s death till He come*” (1 Cor. 11:26).

We offer up the Eucharist in the backdrop of the Second Coming. It is an eschatological sacrament. It assumes meaningfulness only when viewed in the perspective of Christ’s return. It is for this reason the Eucharist is very often called the **Messianic Meal** or **Messianic Banquet**. The communicant mystically enters into the Bridal Chamber to find the divine Bridegroom. This explains why the following prayer is offered up by the celebrant priest or bishop in for receiving the Holy Sacraments: “*Into the splendor of Thy Saints, how can I, who am unworthy enter? For should I dare come into the Bridal Chamber, my robe betrays me. For it is not a wedding garment, and I shall be bound and cast out by the Angels. O Lord, cleanse the pollution of my soul, and through Thy mercy save me!*”

The Communion Table affords us a foretaste of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. As the Bride of

Christ, we anticipate the consummation of our union with our divine Spouse. We are table companions of the Risen Christ. In the mystery of the Eucharist we have an encounter with the living, resurrected Lord and soon coming King.

The Divine Liturgy without the proclamation of the Second Coming deteriorates into an empty religious act. It never ceases to amaze me that a priest or bishop can perform this sacrament and then preach a sermon totally irrelevant to it. **As I have stressed repeatedly in the past, the Pulpit must be in harmony with the Altar. The sermon must flow organically into the theme of the Altar.**

Once we have received from the Communion Cup in repentance and in the awareness of Calvary, we are ready if Jesus were to return that very day. We burst forth with the exuberant testimony of our Eucharistic experience: “***We have seen the Light! We have received of the Heavenly Spirit! We have found the true faith! Worshipping the undivided Trinity, for He has saved us.***”

Without the awareness of the true nature of the Eucharistic mystery, the Communion can turn into a barren ritual. But there is something still worse – the communicant receives condemnation rather than salvation. The Communion can end up being a misfortune for both body and soul. Read 1 Corinthians 11:29.

The psalmist foreshadows this tragic paradox: “*Let their table become a snare before them, and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap*” (Ps. 69:22).

What is holy can become for us a cause of condemnation, sickness and premature death. This warning is clearly spelled out to us in the word of

God just referred to above.

When we encounter the Risen Christ in the sacrament, we are beholding our soon coming King and hearing Him say: “Behold, I come quickly!”

Please do not attend the Sunday Liturgy as a mere spectator. To show reverence is not enough. Focus your eyes on the Cross, on the Empty Tomb, on the Upper Room and then on the Mount of Olive – the place where Christ’s feet will touch the ground at His Second Coming.

Such an attitude of worship will take the guess work out of whether you will make it to Heaven or not. The Eucharist is the unfailing guarantee we have that were we to die on that day the gates of Heaven would be open to us.

Those who contend we can never be certain of Heaven commit mockery of the sacrament of forgiveness and reconciliation. Those who say we never know if we are saved are purveyors of religious sadism, hopelessness and despair.

They are agents of Satan who want to deprive God’s children of their spiritual inheritance. Shun such false teachers.

The Return of Christ

I have to be realistic. The Second Coming of Christ is not a popular sermon topic in the Orthodox Church. Strange, when you consider it is a basic tenet of our faith, revealed in Scripture and confessed in the Nicene Creed: *“I look to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.”*

The very mention of the Second Coming too often imbues fear. Very likely it is because we associate it with judgment and condemnation. The judgment seat of Christ comes to mind. The thought of death and the

second appearance of Christ can terrify even those who call themselves Christians.

The cause of such discomfort and uneasiness stems from the fact that such people in church have never had a personal relationship with Jesus. Furthermore, they have not studied the Bible with all the comforting promises of the Lord.

Why Fear the Second Coming?

The true Christian believer who has had an enduring personal relationship with the Savior during his lifetime has no reason to fear the Second Coming. **How can you possibly dread the One Who loves you and Whom you love?** *“Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).* How can we fear the One Who died on the Cross and paid our sin debt out of His infinite love for us?

If we truly know Jesus and have had an experience of His forgiving grace, how can we possibly be uncomfortable at the thought of His return in glory? If we know His unfailing promises from Scripture and claim them for ourselves, then the thought of His return should normally infuse untold joy in us.

If we do not know Jesus, then it is time to get to know Him in a personal relationship so we can rest in the assurance that He is returning to put us in a place of honor and glory in His Kingdom. The Lord promised He will make us *“sit on His throne” (Rev. 3:21).* **He will inscribe our name in the book of life and secure our eternal blessedness.**

We are already assured of Heaven far in advance of our death. He does not keep the children of the Kingdom guessing. That is not in the character of God. What could be more reassuring than the words of Jesus: *“Rejoice, because your names*

are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20).

So, it is obvious, dear reader, that Jesus is coming back to give you a crown of unfading glory. How can you possibly dread such an exciting prospect? Like St. Paul, you can say while you are still living: *“Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day – and not to me only, but to all them also that love His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6).*

Then you can start loving, and not dreading His appearing. You can then qualify for that place of honor and glory with Jesus. He wants you to be with Him. Once you let that settle in your spirit you will always have a peace about death and the Second Coming, whichever comes first. The bottom line is that whatever happens it will be wonderful and exciting. It is important for Jesus that we be where He is: *“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may also be” (John 14:3).*

Jesus longs to have us with Him. He prayed: “Father, I desire that they also whom thou has given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou has given me” (John 17:24).

It is a mutual longing for each other. It more than expectation. It is a yearning, indeed an impatience to be with Jesus in His place of glory. This makes perfect sense when you consider that we are the Bride of Christ and He is the Bridegroom, and we are both eagerly awaiting for the Wedding day. Our union then will be consummated.

“The Spirit and the Bride say come. And let him that heareth say, Come” (Rev. 22:17). Christ the Bridegroom responds: *“Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come,*

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Lord Jesus” (22:20).

When I state with conviction that Jesus is returning, I am in no way implying WHEN He will return. **The fact that we don’t know the exact day and hour of His return does not mean we should refrain from proclaiming the truth that Jesus is returning.** The Lord clearly stated that it is not for us to know the exact day and hour of His return. What is important for us is that we be found ready for His return. Very clear and simple.

On the other hand, Christ explicitly points out at great length certain events and developments in the world that will indicate the closeness of His return. The Lord called them “*signs of the times.*” Indeed He reprimanded the Pharisees and Sadducees for not discerning them (Matt. 16:3). Throughout the New Testament believers are urged to be aware of the “*signs of the times*” so that they might not be caught unprepared and in a state of spiritual lethargy.

Observing Orthodoxy in America

by Joseph Abbate / President

If you are a member of the Orthodox Church in the United States, you cannot help but notice the large increase of people in the Church. In fact, Orthodox Christianity has grown substantially just in the past few years.

Unlike the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska, which had been there for hundreds of years, many Greeks and Armenians came to this country in the early 1920’s because of the Asia Minor Disaster, when these communities were being all but wiped out by Turkish military forces. Most of them arrived here with only a couple of dollars in their pockets. I remember talking with survivors of that terrible event who ended up in Church parishes in the Chicago area.

These Greek communities had lived and thrived in Asia Minor before the time of Alexander the Great, and in a matter of days were killed, displaced or sold into slavery and

their homes burned to the ground.

The Orthodox Christian faith is still, for the most part unknown or misunderstood in America. This is mostly due to the fact that Orthodox Christians, such as Greeks, Eastern Europeans, Africans and Arab communities did not arrive in America until rather recently, unlike the Western Europeans who had arrived to these shores in the 1500’s and 1600’s. The Americas were primarily settled by Spain, France and England who were Catholics or Protestants.

At the same time, this makes Orthodoxy unique and unstained from many controversial issues of past history which at times can bring divisions regarding different ethnic arguments. Orthodox peoples did not bring slavery with them and were not involved with colonial ambitions. In fact, these matters had diminished several centuries ago in the Byzantine Empire mainly due to Christian ethics demonstrated by the Orthodox peoples of the day.

For example, The Justinian Code had brought an equality during the Medieval period rarely seen at that time. The Greek citizens saved many people of the Jewish and Muslim communities and came to their assistance during the siege of Constantinople while the armies of the Fourth Crusade sacked the city.

At the time of the great influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, many of these migrants worked along with other ethnic groups in America during the turn of the 20th Century. There is a multicultural assembly of Christians in many of our Orthodox parishes today. It is not uncommon for African, Arab and Eastern European Christians to worship together on Sunday mornings. This cannot be said for many other Christian denominations.

During the founding days of the Church, the Apostles and early Christians spread the Gospel to Asia Minor, Africa, Greece and the Italian peninsula. It was all part of the Roman Empire. The ancient capital cities such as Alexandria, Antioch, Athens and Rome became multicultural

centers filled with Orthodox Christian believers.

These multicultural communities have shared a common faith, often through the bond of martyrdom. To this day, we have witnessed over the news the persecution of Orthodox Christians at the hands of dictators, extremist terror groups and systems of governments, such as Communism, which have been hostile to the faith. Greece and much of Eastern Europe suffered at the hands of the Ottoman Empire for 400 to 500 years. There are countless saints and martyrs of this period who are remembered on our Church calendars and during our services.

Converts to Orthodoxy

Overall, the recent converts which I have talked with have come into the Church with a genuine hunger for Christ. They also wish to learn more about the doctrines of the Orthodox Church. Many converts have come out of some abusive teachings and at times off the wall doctrines from their former denominations. However, some of them like to believe that the Church is in a perfect, static state, as if the Church is not made of people who are sometimes imperfect, as if the Church popped out of a fifth century time-warp. They are often unaware of some past and present issues in the Church.

Sometimes, they may frown upon any Orthodox priest or layperson who has been involved in the practice of evangelism either from the pulpit or in writings, or mission outreaches. Many converts fail to comprehend that Sunday morning sermons are actually quite new in the Orthodox Church. Having been a cradle-Orthodox, priests hardly preached. A sermon delivered after the Divine Liturgy was rare, and if the priest did give a message, it was often a just generalized one on moral issues which could be heard in a secular meeting.

Back in the day, the Lord’s prayer used to be said out loud only by the priest in front of the Holy Altar. Such new innovations, as parish-

ioners touching the hem of the priest's garment during the Great Entrance was never done before. Neither was praying with one's hands up. The Divine Liturgy in the Greek Orthodox Church was also done primarily in the Greek language. Bible study groups were also a rarity. The Renewal Movement in the Orthodox Church was to urge Bible Studies and stress a personal relationship with Christ, to bring Him out of obscurity and into a daily reality. Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Fr. John Meyendorff, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann and groups such as the Orthodox Christian Laity (O.C.L.) helped to usher many practices to have the lay people more active in the Church. It took decades to get some of these things accomplished, often with resistance and trials.

Many of the protestant denominations which the new converts had come out of, were often used to strong Gospel messages being proclaimed by their former pastors. They should not relegate preaching to being a Protestant stand-alone tradition. It is a sad fact that many cradle Orthodox Christians had left the Orthodox Church and joined non-denominational or Pentecostal denominations because they never heard the Gospel proclaimed to them. This will probably shock many converts to Orthodoxy, but back in the day many more people had left the Orthodox Church than joined it. I can attest as someone who grew up as a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, that I did not know of God's love or plans for my life because I never heard it in Church. This was not relegated to just one parish. Having Greek relatives, I attended several Orthodox parishes on a good number of occasions.

It was for this reason that the late Father Stephanou wrote the books such as *Sacramentalized but not Evangelized*. Regarding some converts that Fr. Stephanou had observed in his day, he wrote in the Booklet *Converts to Orthodoxy, a Grave Concern*: "They are totally absorbed with the 'riches of Orthodoxy.' They are more eager to convert their former coreligionists (evangelicals, for example) to Orthodoxy rather than convert unbelievers and sinners to the Lord Jesus Christ. Conversion amounts to converting to Orthodoxy, rather than to Christ!"

Such converts are more excited about making an Orthodox out of a Baptist, rather than making a Christian believer out of an atheist, an unbeliever, a drug-addict and an alcoholic. Rather than preach the Gospel to the world at large for the redemption of the lost, they prefer preaching Orthodox ecclesiology, history and liturgy to prove Orthodoxy as the true Church.

What I want to admonish our zealous converts is: bring the lost souls to Christ, and once they have received Christ in a life-changing experience, they will desire to join the Church whose member brought them to salvation. They won't need historical and theological arguments. Don't start with the intellect. Let the Lord change their hearts first. Then you can follow later with the doctrinal superstructure, the blessings of incense and icons!

Is not Orthodoxy a redeeming experience of Christ? After everything is said and done about the historical claims of Orthodoxy, the bottom line remains: is Jesus Christ known in a love relationship? Christ remains at the core of Orthodoxy and not simply commitment to sound doctrine and to Orthodox ethos. The salvation of the soul is at stake – not saving the Byzantine superstructure.

Ex-Roman Catholic priests tend to bring excess baggage with them when they are admitted into the Orthodox Church, like Roman, clerical authoritarianism. On the other hand, many evangelicals and Pentecostals bring with them an aversion for anything that sounds like revival and spontaneous worship. You can hear them saying something like this: 'O, I left all that kind of stuff behind me. Don't talk to me about being born again and all that Protestant jargon.'

We who are cradle members of the Church want to see Orthodoxy vibrant. We do Orthodoxy a disservice when we varnish over all the spots, wrinkles and blemishes that disobedience and rebellion have caused to appear on the body of Christ, (the Church). Converts have a special calling from God; to help put our own house in order, to help get the savor back into the salt and to trim our

lamps with fresh oil.

The best testimony we can give to the world about Orthodoxy is the spiritual power that we manifest. Let the world see our works of faith. Let the world see our changed lives. Let the world see the transforming power of Christ in our lives.

Let the world see that Orthodoxy is the place to go to have human needs met, spiritual, emotional and physical. Let the world see the fruits of the Holy Spirit in Orthodoxy."

Amazing Writings Now Available

The past number of articles published in the Orthodox Evangelist have been excerpts from some older writings of Fr. Eusebius Stephanou. Many of these works are from the 1950's and 1960's. They are very rare and, in most cases cannot be found for sale anywhere else. While we may have 10 or 20 copies for some of them, others, we are down to only one or two originals.

We are making these very rare and insightful writings available for sale. We have made some print copies of some of them. Please tell your friends about them. You may contact us my e-mail or phone for prices.

Titles include: "An Orthodox Interpretation of the Crisis of Western Society", "Charisma and Gnosis in Orthodox Thought", "An Orthodox Approach to Christian Philosophy", "The Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement", "An Analysis of Religious Language Within a Christian Framework", "The Importance of Apostolos Makrakis to Orthodoxy", "Toynbee and the Orthodox Christian Society", "The Orthodox Church Militant", "The Holy Spirit in the Creation of Man", "How the Orthodox Church Differs from Roman Catholicism", "Belief and Practice in the Orthodox Church", "The Charismata in the Early Church Fathers."

We are also in the process of converting these writings to a PDF computer format. Please remember to watch the YouTube videos: **The Logos Outreach with Fr. Eusebius Stephanou** and listen to the Podcasts on Apple and Spotify: **The Logos Orthodox Outreach**.

Joseph Abbate / President