Liturgical Crisis in Russian Orthodoxy Today

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"We do not just feel something in prayer, we know something."

Andrew Louth[1]

Introduction: What Crisis?

Before proceeding to discuss the "liturgical crisis" asserted in the title of this paper, it is necessary first to define the ambiguous expression, "crisis." For there are many possible definitions of the term, and many reasons for the reader to be asking: *What crisis?*

[1] A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery,* Oxford 2003[2], 3.

The word "crisis" (Gr. κρίσις) is the substantive from the Greek verb "κρίνω," which means *to separate, distinguish, decide, judge.* etc. The noun "crisis" can hence have a range of meanings, including *separation, decision, judgment, trial*.[2] It is important for our topic that all these meanings signalize a *turning-point*; a crossroads of some sort.

When used in reference to any complex system – social, political, economical, and so on — a "crisis" is a situation in which the outer forms of the system continue to exist, but have ceased to perform their intended purpose.[3] One speaks of a "marital crisis," for example, when the externals of a marriage continue though the inner bonds of fidelity and dedication that give a marriage meaning have ceased to exist.

It is in a similar sense that I shall use the term "crisis" in reference to our liturgical system today, establishing how and why its *outer forms continue to exist, but cease to fulfill their intended purpose.*

Note from the outset that a crisis in our sense is not necessarily a uniformly negative phenomenon. Admittedly, "crisis" refers to a malfunctioning system, and always involves a certain loss in equilibrium. At the same time, a "crisis" entails *a process of transformation.* This process can be for the better, or for the worse. It is in any event a "crucial" moment, i.e., a *crossroads* ("crucial" stemming from the Latin *crux, crucis*, i.e., *cross*, referring to a *cross in the road* or intersection), and can lead to either growth or decline.

The first part of this paper will review several basic principles of the Byzantine liturgical tradition, i.e., what is *supposed* to be happening at a Byzantine liturgy. The rest of the paper will look at what actually *is* happening in Russian Orthodox practice today; why it can be defined as "crisis"; and, finally, how this state of affairs – paradoxically – can be a good thing.

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[2] *A Greek-English Lexicon,* H. G. Liddell – R. Scott (eds.), Oxford 1996, 996-7.
[3] Cf. M. Slattery, *Key Ideas in Sociology,* Cheltenham 2003, 225.

The "Purpose" of Christian Liturgy

First, let us further clarify our definition of liturgical "crisis," i.e., *when outer forms continue to exist, but have ceased to fulfill their intended purpose.* What do we mean by the "intended purpose" of liturgy?

The "purpose" of liturgy can be, and indeed has been, characterized in many different ways. On the most basic level one might say the purpose of liturgy is communion with God,[4] through a special form of sacramental union or dialogue with Him. One might also say that liturgy is there to bring the Church together, as the people of God.[5] Because liturgy, in Greek *leitourgia,* from the Greek *lietos* (of or for the people) and *ergon* (work, task, duty, etc.) literally means "a work of/for the people." In yet another, especially eloquent explanation, it has been maintained that liturgy is about *change,* not exclusively or primarily of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, but of *us* into the daughters and sons of God.[6]

All these definitions of liturgy's "purpose" hold true, of course. Liturgy is certainly bringing us into communion with God, and bringing us together as Church, and changing us by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In the case of the eucharistic celebration, however, there is only one objective defined by the Son of God Himself, and that is, "Do this *in remembrance of Me*" (*Touto poieite eis tin emin anamnesin,* Lk. 22:19). This objective of *remembrance,* or of *reminding* us of Jesus and all that He means and does for us and "for the life of the world" is fulfilled in the symbolic *act* and *word* of the Eucharistic Liturgy.

For our later reflections on the present-day liturgical crisis, note that according to the Byzantine liturgical system, *both act and word* – not only one of these elements

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[4] See for example Gregory Dix's description of what liturgy means for "the ordinary man," in G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy,* London 1964[9], xiv.

[5] For more on the liturgy as a realization of the Church and on "Eucharistic Ecclesiology," see K. – Ch. Felmy, *Die Deutung der Göttlichen Liturgie in der Russischen Theologie,* Berlin – New York 1984, 405ff.

[6] R.F. Taft, "What Does Liturgy Do?" in Id., *Beyond East and West. Problems in Liturgical Understanding,* Rome 2001[2], 239-258, esp. 247.

without the other – are together meant to serve this pristine liturgical purpose of *anamnesis.* Yet more often than not the *word* falls through the cracks of our present-day practice, as we shall see later.

Why is Byzantine Liturgy "Symbolic"?

But before reflecting further on this union of symbolic *action* and *word* in liturgy, we should pause to explain why Byzantine liturgy, like all Christian liturgy, is said to be "symbolic." For that may seem obvious, but how that is so requires an explanation.

Christian theology traditionally distinguishes three periods in the history of our salvation: 1.) First, the time of *shadows*, which was the time of the Old Testament; 2.) Second, the time of *symbols* or *icons*, which is the present time of the Church; and 3.) Third, the time of final fulfillment or the *eschaton,* when we shall see God face-to-face.[7] This is why Christian liturgy in both East and West cannot but operate through symbols. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger put it, "We need the *intermediary* and do not yet see the Lord «as He is»… The theology of the liturgy is, in a special way, 'symbolic theology,' a theology of symbols, which unite us with the hidden reality."[8]

The Greek word for "symbol," *symbolon,* comes from the Greek verb *symballo,* meaning "to bring together, unite."[9] A "symbol," when perceived in faith, brings together two separate realities: 1.) the invisible *mystery* or sacrament of the abiding, unchangeable faith, and 2.) the visible, material world.[10] We see the visible, material bread and wine, and understand it is the Body and Blood of Christ. "A mystery is not

[7] Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie,* Freiburg i. Br. 2000, 48-53.
[8] Ibid., 53.
[9] *A Greek-English Lexicon,* H. G. Liddell – R. Scott (eds.), Oxford 1996, 1674-5.
[10] For more on "symbol" in general and the "Symbolgestalt" (structure of symbols) of Byzantine Liturgy see H.-J. Schultz, "Kultsymbolik der Byzantinischen Kirche," in F. Hermann (ed.), *Symbolik des Orthodoxen und orientalischen Christentums* (Symbolik der Religionen X), Stuttgart 1962, 4-49, here 4-6, and R. Bornert, "Die Symbolgestalt der Byzantinischen Liturgie, *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 12 (1970) 54-68.

when we believe what we see," writes St. John Chrysostom (+407), "but when we see one thing and believe about it something else."[11]

The basis for all Christian liturgical symbolism is the Incarnation. As Origen wrote in his *Commentary on Romans* 4:2, in Jesus Christ "We see one thing but understand another. We see a man, but believe in God."[12] Jesus Christ, who is t*he symbol* par excellence; the "*icon* of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), brought together the divine and the human, the invisible and the material, in perfect union. Having given Himself "for the life of the world," resurrected on the third day, ascended and enthroned to the right hand of the Father, it is Christ who sent His Holy Spirit to perpetuate and actualize this salvific union between the invisible and the visible, the divine and the human, until the end of time. And thus it is the central mystery of the Incarnation that makes possible the sacramental life of the Church, which functions through grace-filled symbols.

Icon and Word in the Byzantine Liturgical "System"

A primary element of Christian worship, what constitutes what the Anglican liturgist Gregory Dix called the "shape" of the liturgy,[13] is of course not the words but the *actions*, e.g., offering, blessing, breaking the Bread; then taking, eating, drinking. In addition to these actions, there are other non-textual or ceremonial aspects of the celebration that are vital to "understanding" it. As Notre Dame Professor Peter Jefferey points out, the usual historical trajectory of ritual is action – text – theology, in that order.[14]

Having said that, let us repeat that the intelligible *word* must, nonetheless, accompany all the symbolic actions of the liturgical celebration. This is especially true

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[11] *Homilies on Second Corinthians* VII.1, in P. Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 12, Peabody, MA 1995, 309-10, quoted by S. Muksuris, "Liturgical Mystagogy and Its Application in the Byzantine Prothesis Rite," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 49:3-4 (2004) 291-306, here 292.
[12] PG 14:968B, quoted by Taft, "What Does Liturgy Do?" 254 (see note 6 above).
[13] Cf. G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy,* London 1964[9].
[14] P. Jeffery, "The Meanings and Functions of *Kyrie eleison,*" in B.D. Spinks (ed.), *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer. Trinity, Christology, and Liturgical Theology,* Collegeville 2008, 127-194, here 140.

of the Byzantine Orthodox tradition, where even in iconography the *symbol* or *icon* is always accompanied by the *word*, just as the Son of God, in His Incarnation, did not merely grant us a vision of His divine presence among us while leaving us to guess what His appearance to us meant. He also left us His *word.* I stress this point, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, because it is a *disregard for the word* that lies at the heart of our liturgical crisis today. I shall return to this observation toward the end of this essay.

Just as any painted Byzantine icon must have an inscription to be canonical, so must the heavily-symbolic liturgy be accompanied by a *text*.[15] We see the Little Entrance, a symbolic action, and the priest (silently) reads the prayer that accompanies it. We see the Great Entrance, and the priest (silently) reads prayers that accompany that. We await and approach Communion at this celebration, which is accompanied by *words* of the Eucharistic Prayer, read by the celebrant (silently).

Why is this union of *icon and word* so important in Byzantine tradition? Because an icon or symbol could, potentially, be ambiguous and misinterpreted. The Church guarantees her own "interpretation" by accompanying her symbols with Orthodox *words.* Thus Orthodox worship is called *logike latreia,* or *logical/meaningful worship.* It does not call us to any "nirvana," not to any emptying of our minds, but to the Word, made incarnate for our salvation. *Kai o logos sarx egeneto. And the Word became flesh.* (Jn 1:14). The message of Christ, the eternal *meaning*, the eternal *Word*, is made present to us along with His appearance as "the icon of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). That is the basis of Eastern Orthodox worship, unlike other Eastern spiritualities.

The "Word" in Byzantine Liturgy

Hence Christian worship, Byzantine worship included, is meant to be *intelligible.* This is not to say one must, or even can, grasp the inexhaustible

[15] H.-J. Schultz, "Kultsymbolik der Byzantinischen Kirche," in F. Hermann (ed.), *Symbolik des Orthodoxen und orientalischen Christentums* (Symbolik der Religionen X), Stuttgart 1962, 4-5.

theological depth of the Mystery; it is only to say that the human language of the liturgy must be one that the faithful understand. This ancient principle of *intelligibility in Christian worship* is articulated most famously in 1 Cor 14:

> "…if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. **Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue**."

In Byzantine Liturgy the (presumably intelligible) "word" accompanying the "icon" or *symbol* that is the liturgy is provided by two sets of texts: 1. the liturgical texts themselves; and 2. the mystagogical commentaries on the liturgical texts.

The Eucharistic Prayer

In the case of the Eucharist or Divine Liturgy, the crucial word accompanying the liturgical action is the *Anaphora* or main prayer of the Eucharist recited by the presiding priest or bishop at every Divine Liturgy, recounting all the salvific works of the Son of God, according to the will of the Father, in the Holy Spirit, throughout the ages. This prayer is not audible to the congregation in most of the Orthodox churches, in perplexing defiance of the Apostle Paul's insistence on intelligibility in Christian worship, because in our churches the celebrant reads the prayer silently within the altar room or sanctuary. This is why a large part of our liturgical *remembrance* – the all-important *word*-part - falls through the cracks. And yet it is there to *remind us—all of us—* of the mysteries of our salvation through Christ. It is not there to remind just the celebrating priest of these things, and certainly not to remind *God* of His salvific works. It is there for *us,* to "do this" *in remembrance of Him.*

Was the text of the Eucharistic Prayer handed down to us, unchanged, from the Apostles? Of course not. We know that in the Early Church the Eucharistic Prayer was first extemporized by each celebrant, according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and only later did the Church insist on a fixed, written text that was to be

followed by all, in avoidance of heretical teachings creeping into liturgical practice.[16] The present-day text does not even pretend to be that of the Apostles, because it is called, for example, the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, who died in AD 407, or the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil, who died in AD 379. Hundreds of years after the Apostles. Later still is our earliest witness to the text of the Divine Liturgy in a manuscript of the late-8th century, the codex *Barberini 336,* preserved in the Vatican Library.[17] And of course the text we find in this late-8th c. codex is not identical to the one we have in our liturgical books now.

So, our liturgical remembrance or anamnesis underwent change and development throughout the centuries. It has a *history.* This proposition will appear a truism for the educated reader. But the fact that our liturgy developed throughout *history* passes under the radar of our modern-day approach to Orthodox liturgy, characterized by a pronounced *reluctance to change,* based on an ahistorical vision of Tradition. The present-day *reluctance to change*, one of the symptoms of our liturgical crisis, will be examined at a later point in this paper.

Mystagogy

The entire *Symbolgestalt* or "symbolic structure" of the Byzantine Liturgy was accompanied and inspired by *mystagogical* commentaries or explanations by the Church Fathers.[18] *Mystagogy* (Gr. μυσταγωγία, from μύστης and ἄγω), meaning *introduction/initiation into the mystery,* is another indispensable *word*-element of the Byzantine liturgical tradition, because the Byzantine liturgy is not immediately comprehensible to the uninitiated observer. The Byzantine liturgy "means" much

[16] Cf. A. Bouley, *From Freedom to Formula. The Evolution of the Eucharistic Prayer from Oral Improvisation to Written Texts*, Washington, DC 1981.
[17] S. Parenti and E. Velkovska (eds.), *L'Eucologio Barberini gr. 336. Seconda edizione riveduta con traduzione in lingua italiana* (BELS 80), Rome 2000.
[18] On the Byzantine mystagogical commentaries see R. Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la Divine Liturgie du VII^e au XV^e siècle* (AOC 9) Paris 1966, and the briefer overview in H.-J. Schultz, *Die Byzantinische Liturgie. Glaubenszeugnis und Symbolgestalt,* Trier 1980, esp. 63-90.

more than is immediately obvious from the outer form of its actions and the literal significance of its texts.

Hence it requires *initiation* into its special "Symbolgestalt" and its special language, which is *allegory.* The mystagogical commentaries of the Fathers make use of *allegory* (from *allos* and *agoreuo,* "to say otherwise"), a figurative mode of speaking that finds meaning beyond the literal, by drawing a comparison between one element of the Mystery of salvation and another. For example, the entrance of the priest into the sanctuary can be seen to signify the Lord's entrance into Jerusalem. The entrance of the priest can alternatively signify the soul's ascent into heaven through Christian virtue and sanctity. These are different *allegorical* explanations of an action that in its outer, visible form is simply a man walking from one chamber of the church into another. The visible, immediately-obvious outer form presents different exegetical possibilities, within the realm of the manifold Mystery revealed by Tradition. Thus one uses the outer form of the celebration *to bring to mind* various events, aspects, persons involved in the manifold Mystery of salvation. The point of such cross-referencing of various elements of Tradition is simple: it is *remembrance* or *anamnesis,* a way of *doing this in remembrance of Him.*

Though a detailed explanation of allegorical mystagogy would far exceed the scope of this paper, it is important to note that there were *different mystagogies* at *different times* and *different places* throughout Church History. In the past there were liturgical commentators from major centers of Eastern Christianity like Alexandria, Antioch, or Constantinople, or the monastic cradles of the Holy Land, Mt Athos, and Sinai. Thereafter, the Russian Orthodox tradition has its own history of liturgical commentary, described in some detail in a monograph by K.-Ch. Felmy.[19]

[19] K.-Ch. Felmy, *Die Deutung der Göttlichen Liturgie in der Russischen Theologie,* Berlin-New York 1984.

Equally importantly, there were and are *different levels* of meaning perceived in the liturgy. One level is ἱστορία, the *historical* meaning, and the other is θεωρία, the *spiritual* meaning attached to (and rooted in) the historical one.[20]

For mystagogy is to liturgy what exegesis is to scripture; its accents and style *change* throughout history, according to the cultural context of different periods. At the same time, the *object* of both mystagogy and exegesis, the Mystery of salvation, remains the same. Just as every generation of Christians is called to engage Scripture and inevitably has its own exegetical tendencies, so it is also vital to engage liturgy in every generation, to make possible the mystagogy or *initiation* of that generation – in its own time and place – into the abiding Mystery.

It must be flatly stated, however, that "Mystagogy" plays no significant role in the overwhelming majority of Russian Orthodox parishes today, - a problem, incidentally, nowise limited to the Russian Orthodox. Most people would have trouble even pronouncing the word "mystagogy," let alone know what it means. Today one must explain the term as if it were an obscure piece of historical trivia. And yet the outer form of our Byzantine liturgical system, its entire symbolic structure, *still presumes mystagogical instruction.* So the "Symbolgestalt" or *outer form continues to exist*, but no longer initiates into the Mystery. Thus in our time Orthodox theologians are at pains to explain (or even apologize for) *allegory,*[21] as for a slightly embarrassing grandparent who, time and again, shows up for your dinner party uninvited and won't stop talking!

[20] R. Bornert, "Die Symbolgestalt der Byzantinischen Liturgie," *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 12 (1970), 54-68, here 67.

[21] See for example chapter V, "Return to Allegory," in the important monograph: A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery,* Oxford 2003[2], 96-122; and A. Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology,* London 1966, 99ff. Cf. also R. Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35 (1980-81) 45-75.

Such an *inability to relate,* or what T.S. Eliot called a "dissociation of sensibility,"[22] today results in our *disarray of mystagogical instruction.* It is another symptom of the present-day liturgical crisis.

The Two Pillars of Tradition: Mystery and History

But before finally turning to the present-day, it is important to sum up everything said heretofore in one general observation. And that is, *the entire edifice of the Church's Tradition rests on two fundamental pillars, mystery and history.*

This can be said of all the aspects of the Tradition – scriptural, dogmatic, canonical, liturgical, hagiographical, monastic, ascetical, mystical... When contemplating any aspect of our faith, rooted in the Incarnation of the Word, one engages both the *eternal* and the *temporal.* The eternal, unchanging part is the *mystery* of our faith in Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Hebr. 13:8), with all the abiding truths revealed to us in that faith. The temporal, changing part is the *history* of this revelation, for it is, as a matter of fact, revealed to us at specific points in time. For this reason the Creed insists, as some may think, superfluously, that He was crucified "under Pontius Pilate." It happened, the Creed is saying, *at a specific point in history*. It is not a parable, not a fairy-tale, neither a legend nor a myth.[23]

Throughout the ages Christian theology in both East and West has been challenged, with varying degrees of success, to strike a proper balance between the two pillars of the Tradition, mystery and history. Both these pillars demand sufficient attention. Otherwise a disregard for one is a detriment to the other, resulting in a lop-sided distortion of the Christian message, and can potentially wreak havoc on the entire edifice called Tradition.

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[22] Quoted by A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery,* Oxford 2003[2], 1.

[23] Cf. G. Florovsky,"Položenie xristianskogo istorika" (The Predicament of the Christian Historian), in Ibid., *Dogmat i Istoria,* Moscow 1998, 39-79, here 40.

In the early centuries of the Church's history, several distortions perceived as traceable to this lack of balance were struck down and condemned as heresies. In AD 431 the Third Ecumenical Council condemned a teaching deemed typical of the "Antiochian" school's exegetical style that tended to pay far more attention to *history* than to the *mystery* it revealed. The heresy, known as "Nestorianism," seemed to stress the *human, historically-evident* nature of Christ to the detriment of His *divine, mystically-perceived* nature as the Son of God.

Twenty years later, the Fourth Ecumenical Council of AD 451 battled the opposite extreme, which like the so-called "Alexandrian" exegetical school, known for its interest in the *spiritual* meaning of Sacred Scripture, at times to the point of turning its historical aspect into allegory, as was the case with Origen's theology of the Eucharist.[24] The heresy of "Monophysitism," particularly popular among Egyptian monastics, characteristically stressed the *divine* nature of Christ, while not always attending sufficiently to His human nature.

Today we continue to walk a theological tightrope between the two pillars propping up the living Tradition: mystery and history. In Russian Orthodox practice today it is difficult to say which of these two is more neglected. But contrary to modern-day theological concerns,[25] a day-to-day experience of church life indicates that it is an ignorance of *history* that more thoroughly pervades our approach to Orthodox liturgy.

Russian Orthodox Liturgy Today: Symptoms of the Crisis

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[24] See L. Lies, *Wort und Eucharistie bei Origenes: zur Spiritualisierungstendenz des Eucharistieverständnisses* (Innsbrucker theologische Studien 1), Innsbruck-Vienna 1982[2].

[25] Today Orthodox theologians are often at pains to counter a modern-day academic "historico-critical" approach to theology, which strives to see things "as they really happened." Cf. J. Behr, *The Mystery of Christ,* Crestwood, NY 2006, 15ff; and A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery,* Oxford 2003. The historical-critical approach, however, nowise afflicts Russian Orthodox liturgical piety, and appears to be limited to academic theology.

Regarding the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church today, let us begin by simply listing the symptoms of the "crisis" alleged in the title of this paper, and consider them in light of the Tradition as explored above. The following common phenomena in modern-day Russian Orthodox liturgical practice are among those things that render the celebration largely *unintelligible*:

- disarray and neglect of mystagogical and historical instruction;
- antiquated liturgical language;
- silent reading of prayers;
- no (or little) lay participation, especially marginalizing children and women;
- no (or little) congregational singing;
- a disregard for the word in liturgy
- a quest for liturgical surrogates
- a reluctance to change all-of-the-above, based on an a-historical perception of Tradition.

Taken together, these phenomena form a vicious circle that both causes and perpetuates the unintelligibility of the Byzantine liturgy, the outer forms of which *have ceased to fulfill their intended purpose*, a central element of which is *anamnesis* as established above.

While it is impossible to examine each of the above-listed "symptoms" in this essay, I shall take a closer look at the most important, final three: 1. *a disregard for the word* in liturgy; 2. a quest on the part of the worshipping faithful for *liturgical surrogates*; and 3. a *reluctance to change* all-of-the-above, based on an a-historical perception of Tradition.

The Disregard for the Word

The *inaudibility* of the silently-read, central prayers of the Eucharist,[26] along with the *unintelligibility* of many prayers even when recited audibly in Old Slavonic,[27] contribute to a general *disregard for the word* within Russian Orthodox liturgical congregations. This is not only understandable; it is almost inevitable. For anyone constantly subjected to a word either inaudible, unintelligible, or both, will eventually give up and come to *ignore that word.* In fact, most faithful simply do not attend those services that consist mostly of *the word,* for example, the so-called All-Night Vigil (in Russian practice), or Matins that precede the Divine Liturgy in Greek and several other Orthodox churches.

In Russian Orthodox parishes, this can also be observed in the heightened activity of the worshipping faithful during "slow" moments of the liturgy like the Scripture readings, lengthy hymnographical material like the Canon during Matins, the Hours, and so on.[28] During the reading of the Third and Sixth Hours before Divine Liturgy, for example, the faithful and the celebrants are occupied with all sorts of activities, ranging from sweeping the floor to the weekly choir rehearsal, or putting up candles, hearing confessions, celebrating the Prothesis —anything *but praying the Hours.* It appears that the texts have become so inaccessible that the faithful have given up even trying to listen to them. Hence each worshipping believer is left to his or her own devices to fill the gaps of their word-less liturgy with their own individually-divined "meaning" and activity. The praying community is not

[26] On the origins of the silent reading of the Eucharistic Prayer see R. Taft, "Was the Eucharistic Anaphora Recited Secretly or Aloud? The Ancient Tradition and What Became of It," in Roberta R. Ervine (ed.), *Worship Traditions in Armenia and the Neighboring Christian East*. An International Symposium in Honor of the 40th Anniversary of St Nersess Armenian Seminary (AVANT series 3), Crestwood, NY 2006, 15-57.

[27] The recent "draft document" of a liturgical commission of the Russian Orthodox Church on liturgical language of June 2011 (see below) quotes the late Patriarch Alexis II, stating that the sense of the services is "not grasped" by the people, and calling "to think how we can make the liturgy more accessible to the people" (§7). See the original Russian text of the "Draft of the Document «Church Slavonic in the Life of the Russian Orthodox Church of the 21st Century»" (*Proekt dokumenta "Cerkovnoslavianskij jazyk v žizni Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi XXI veka"*)) online at http://www.bogoslov.ru/text/1762795.html .

[28] Cf. V. Larin, "Roman Catholic Students at Russian Orthodox Liturgy: The Communion of the Churches, *From the Bottom Up,*" *Worship* 86/4 (2012) 311-323, esp. 317.

enveloped and nurtured in the wealth of intended *anamnesis* imbedded in the Byzantine tradition and actualized in its mystagogy and liturgical texts. The nurturing and liberating Word is not being heard or engaged, so the faithful are forced into a *quest for liturgical surrogates*.

The Quest for Liturgical Surrogates

A quest for liturgical surrogates on the part of the faithful, due to a largely unintelligible liturgy, is not a new phenomenon in the history of Christian worship. The same phenomenon characterized Roman-Catholic liturgical piety throughout the Middle Ages and all the way up to the Vatican II (1962-1965) liturgical reforms, prior to which the Mass, celebrated in Latin, had been unintelligible to most of the laity.[29] The people prayed *at* the liturgy, but not *the liturgy,* replacing the liturgy of the Church with their own private devotions.[30]

A similar situation characterizes the celebration of a Russian Orthodox liturgy today, where one can observe the following activities, some of which have already been mentioned above:

- *confessions* heard throughout the entire eucharistic celebration;
- heightened *activity* during "slow" moments of liturgy (readings);
- keeping small children and women non-liturgically *occupied* during liturgy;
- the "Thanksgiving Litany" or *blagodarstvennyj moleben,* celebrated immediately after the Eucharist.

The fact that *confessions are heard during the entire eucharistic celebration* in large Russian Orthodox parishes where more than one priest is available is an unintended result of a requirement, enforced in the Russian Orthodox Church, that laypeople

[29] See J. A. Jungmann, *Liturgisches Erbe und Pastorale Gegenwart,* Innsbruck-Wien-München 1960, 87-118; and L. Bouyer, *La vie de la liturgie,* Paris 1956, 12-26.
[30] For more on the distinction between private devotions and liturgy in Roman Catholicism, see the "*Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy. Principles and Guidelines"* of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, December 2001, at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html.

receive absolution at confession before every reception of Holy Communion. It is also necessitated by the very positive modern renewal of frequent Communion, so that practically *all* the faithful now receive Holy Communion at every Sunday Divine Liturgy.

On the other hand, however, this also reflects a subtle *liturgical consumerism,* because most of the congregation does not attend services at which Communion is *not* distributed. For the average worshipper liturgical life has come to mean *my confession* and *my Communion.* In other words, *what I get out of it.* The All-Night Vigil, as mentioned above, attracts but a small fraction of the crowd that files in for Divine Liturgy. The understandable exception to this is Palm Sunday vigil, at which the people *receive palms.* So there is practically no other time, outside the Divine Liturgy, to hear confessions.

The daunting challenge of *keeping small children and women occupied during liturgy*, i.e., finding liturgical or wholly non-liturgical "surrogates" for children and women, is a result of the dearth of opportunities for most of the laity to actively participate *liturgically* in the celebration. This predicament is not limited to women and small children, of course, but is less extreme for men and older boys, who have the opportunity to assist – or celebrate – in the sanctuary. Small children bring their Legos or coloring books or some other distraction, or are even sent outside to play until Communion. Women and girls who are not blessed with a musical ear (and hence cannot sing in the choir) often opt to prepare the post-liturgy lunch or coffee in the parish hall during liturgy, or might occupy themselves in church with tending the candle-stands, wiping the icons with Windex, or selling candles in the narthex. I have explored this issue in another article, so it need not detain us here.[31]

Perhaps the most striking "liturgical surrogate" of all is the celebration of a *Thanksgiving Litany* or *blagodarstvennyj moleben* immediately after the *Eucharist* (the

[31] See V. Larin, "Active Participation of the Faithful in Byzantine Liturgy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 57:1 (2013) 67-88.

latter meaning, of course, *thanksgiving* in Greek). This is commonly done at Russian Orthodox parishes, especially of the Moscow Patriarchate. The people become especially energized at this moment, and rush to hand the priest "commemorative notes" or *pominal'nye zapiski* with lists of the names of deceased or living loved ones. Brief, easily-understandable petitions and troparia are chanted, giving thanks to the Lord for everything, and the priest or priests commemorate the names aloud. And all this is done despite the fact that *the bloodless sacrifice* of the Eucharist, complete with commemorations of the living and the deceased, has just been celebrated at the altar! It is apparent that the people somehow "register" the post-eucharistic commemoration at the litany more completely, *because they can hear it* and *understand it,* as distinct from their perception of the actual Eucharist.

Reluctance to Change

Since the pre-revolutionary period (pre-1917),[32] there has been very little movement on the official level of the Russian Orthodox Church toward reforming the liturgical practices described above. This is true despite the fact that today there are two official liturgical commissions of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The first of these is the *Sinodal'naja liturgičeskaja komissija* or Synodal Liturgical Commission (SLC), created in 1989.[33] Until recently, this was the only liturgical commission of the ROC. The commission today has six members (one bishop who is presider, two archimandrites, one abbot and two priests), and its job description reads as follows: "*The job of the SLC is the redaction and composition of new liturgical texts and services of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the proposition of solutions to complex issues of the [church] calendar.*"[34] Note that the only "issues" mentioned in this job description are, perplexingly, "complex issues of the [church] calendar." The

[32] For the movement toward liturgical reform in the Russian Orthodox Church prior to and during the Moscow Council of 1917-1918 see N. Balashov, *Na puti k liturgičeskomu vozroždeniju,* Moscow 2001.
[33] Cf. A. Trubacev, "Bogoslužebnaja sinodal'naja komissija," *Pravoslavnaja Encyklopedia* 5, Moscow 2009, 535-6. The article is available online at http://www.pravenc.ru/text/149583.html.
[34] Ibid., 535.

proposals and texts of the commission must be ratified by "the Patriarch and Synod."[35] To date, the work of the SLC has accomplished two things: 1. the production of services to new saints, and 2. the (re-)insertion of the words "God, save the pious!" into the Divine Liturgy, for reasons unknown to this author.

Another, significantly larger, liturgical commission was created by the Council of ROC of 2009, as a regularly-meeting subunit of the "Inter-conciliar presence" (*Mežsobornoe prisutstvie*), charged with preparing documents to be discussed by the next Bishops' Council of the ROC. This *Commission of the Inter-conciliar Presence on Issues of Liturgy and Church Art* boasts twenty-five members, including eight bishops (one of whom presides), sixteen priests and one abbess. This commission worked on several documents in the inter-conciliar period between 2009 and the recent ROC Bishops' Council of February 2013.

Of the documents prepared by the commission prior to the Bishops' Council of February 2013, only one addressed a liturgical issue mentioned in this paper, and that is, the problem of liturgical language. A tentative "draft" of the document (*Proekt dokumenta*) was circulated among dioceses and made available for discussion online in June 2011.[36] In its very first sentence the text asserts that Old Slavonic is "an inalienable part of the liturgical tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church" (*neot'emlemaja čast' bogoslužebnoj tradicii Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi*), and then notes the difficulties of understanding Old Slavonic because of the development of the Russian language. The document recognizes the importance of intelligibility in liturgy, quoting, among other sources, 1 Cor 14 already cited above in this paper.

As a solution to the present-day incomprehensibility of Old Slavonic, the "draft document" proposes *the simplification of Old Slavonic* by adapting it to modern

[35] Ibid.

[36] The original Russian text of the "Draft of the Document «Church Slavonic in the Life of the Russian Orthodox Church of the 21st Century»" (*Proekt dokumenta "Cerkovnoslavianskij jazyk v žizni Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi XXI veka"*) is accessible online at http://www.bogoslov.ru/text/1762795.html.

Russian in its syntax and some of its vocabulary. In other words, the document does propose changes to Old Slavonic, but does not go as far as suggesting a transition to the vernacular. The *reluctance to change* that is obvious in this proposal stems from the conviction, expressed in the first sentence of the document, that Old Slavonic is an "inalienable" part of the tradition.

As far as one can judge from the ensuing discussion on various blogs in the Russian internet, this proposal seemed to dissatisfy both the strict proponents of the "traditional" language, as well as those who advocate a transition to Russian. Interestingly, many also argued that *understanding the words* was not central to Orthodox worship, which functions on a mystical level beyond that of "intellectual" understanding.[37] Be that as it may in the unofficial blogosphere, the "draft document" was not included in the agenda of the ROC Bishops' Council of February 2-5, 2013, which did not address any of the liturgical problems mentioned in this paper.

The brief tale of the life and death of the "draft document" is a revealing example of a very specific present-day attitude toward liturgical tradition. On the one hand, it is evident that there is some awareness of *a problem,* in this case, the unintelligibility of Old Slavonic. On the other hand, any initiative to solve the problem through *change* comes up against a reluctance to do so. This reluctance is informed primarily by a faith in the "inalienability" of the outer forms of tradition,[38] even in the case of something as historically changeable as language. Such a conviction reveals insensitivity to *history* and its consequences for the outer forms of tradition.

[37] It is impossible to reference and discuss the widespread discussion of the document on liturgical language in the Russian blogosphere, which is easily accessible online by doing a search of the document's title (see previous note) in the search engine of yandex.ru.

[38] Church unity has also been mentioned as a concern of proponents of Old Slavonic (see for example http://en.rian.ru/art_living/20110620/164728015.html). That is a moot point, however, due to the fact that many parishes of the Russian diaspora have been celebrating in their local vernaculars for a century.

The Good News

There is, however, a positive side to the liturgical crisis described in the previous pages. Because the imperfections in the earthly existence of the divine-human structure that is the Church are a humbling and inspiring reminder of the "not yet" in the awaited eschatological fulfillment. This could be called *the eschatological dimension of human error in Church history.* Self-critical reflection on what *we do* and *have done* imperfectly as the historical Church, in response to the command to *Do this,* can thus be an invigorating call to renewal, re-assessment, and at the same time – to humility and patience.

A historically-informed, honest engagement with our present-day liturgical tradition-in-crisis can indeed have many benefits. Such an engagement, both historical and self-critical, involves what has been called "learning by suffering (pathei mathos), suffering the process of *undeception,* which is usually painful"[39] and leads to humility. It also prevents dogmatizing the present as if it were eternal,[40] thereby revealing *the possibility of change* and instilling the courage to implement it.

In addition to humility and the courage to change, a historical and self-critical view of the contemporary liturgical crisis teaches *patience,* tempering any rash or potentially damaging approach to reform. Patience is a lesson taught by the very fact of Church *history,* by the Church's very confinement within this world to *time.* On this note I shall conclude with the inimitable words of Hans Urs von Balthasar:

> "Hence the importance of patience in the New Testament, which becomes the basic constituent of Christianity, more central even than humility: the power to wait, to persevere, to hold out, to endure to the end, not to transcend one's own limitations, not to force issues by playing the hero or the titan, but to practice the virtue that lies beyond heroism, the meekness

[39] A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery,* Oxford 2003[2], 36.

[40] "History should always free us from the tyranny of the present, perhaps all the more so when that present claims to be eternal." G. Macy, "Impasse Passé**:** Conjugating a Tense Past," in J.Y. Tan (ed.), *The Catholic Theological Society of America. Proceedings of the Sixty-fourth Annual Convention, Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 4-7, 2009*, Cincinnati 2009, 1-20, here 9.

of the lamb which is *led*."[41]

[41] *A Theology of History,* San Francisco 1994, 37.