

## **The Eucharist in the Pastoral and Liturgical Practice of the Russian Orthodox Church**

### *1. The Origins*

The liturgical tradition received by the Russian Church after the Baptism of Rus' in 988, was of Byzantine origin. But it was not purely Constantinopolitan; rather, it relied on a corpus of liturgical and patristic translations into Slavonic language made by St. Clement of Ochrid and his co-workers, who were active in the 1st half of the 10th century in the Western Bulgarian lands, in a region of modern Macedonia and Albania.

There can be no doubt that the Byzantine formularies of the Eucharistic liturgy held a prominent place in this corpus — just like in the corpus of translations made by Sts. Cyril and Methodius in the late 9th century, where a prominent place was taken by the versions of *ordinarium* and *propria* of the Latin mass. In the oldest extant Slavonic manuscripts we find partly preserved Slavonic translations of the two Constantinopolitan Eucharistic formularies, of St. Basil and of St. John Chrysostom, along with translations of different pieces from the Latin Sacramentary and from the Jerusalemite formulary of Divine liturgy ascribed to St. James.

The proper understanding of the Eucharistic service by the Slavs was safeguarded by a few didactic texts translated by the creators of the Slavonic literacy. These included the set of Mystagogical homilies of St. Cyril (or John) of Jerusalem, a commentary on the Divine liturgy ascribed to St. Germanos of Constantinople (though in the oldest manuscripts bears the name of St. Basil the Great), Eucharistic miracle stories from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. To these St. Clement of Ochrid added his own homily, which is an important witness to the actual perception of the Eucharist by a 10th-century Orthodox hierarch and ecclesiastical author.

The Eucharistic formularies of St. Basil and of St. John Chrysostom translated by Clement and his accomplices contained regular prayers from the Euchologion of Constantinople, supplemented by a number of specific additional ones. Some of them are also found in the Greek Euchologia from the Southern Italy, some of them seemingly have no Greek prototype. Thus, the oldest stratum of liturgical tradition of those Slavs who were adhering to the Eastern rite appears to be Western Byzantine — like that of the South-Italian Greeks, — and not purely Constantinopolitan. When Rus' was baptized in the late 10th century, this stratum spread to Rus' and formed the initial layer of its own tradition.

By the 11th century, an updated version of the Slavonic Euchologion, including the Eucharistic rites, has appeared. This time it was verified according to the Constantinopolitan standard. But the older stratum of tradition continued to co-exist with an updated one, forming a specific Old-Russian type of the eucharistic formulary, which was a mixture of two basic liturgical layers, a Western Byzantine and a Constantinopolitan, further supplemented by additional prayers originating in the private practices of the middle- and late-Byzantine asceticism.

As for the understanding of the Eucharist in the Old Rus', it was framed by, first, the Eucharistic formularies themselves (as I am going to show at length elsewhere, these have adopted, among other things, the homily of St. Clement, now turned into a preparatory prayer of a priest to be read by him silently before celebrating the Eucharist), and second, by a selection of short pseudonymous liturgical commentaries, including those ascribed to St. Basil and St. Gregory the Theologian (I have presented an *editio princeps* of the Greek text of the latter a few years ago in the "Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata"). By the 14th century these commentaries together with some other texts were blended into a united commentary called "The Liturgy Interpreted", which was included into the Nomokanon and thus became the canonical explanation of the Eucharist for the Russians until the mid-17th century.

The actual practice of Eucharistic participation in the Old Rus' can be traced from the canonical responses of Kievan metropolitans and other Russian hierarchs. Thus, for the 12th century, we see from the responses of archbishop Niphont of Novgorod to the "Questions of Kirik of Novgorod" that ordinary people received communion quite regularly, probably on weekly basis. The main requirement for communicants was sexual purity: those unmarried should not be guilty of any sort of fornication; those married should abstain from their partners for two days (or even just for a day, if they are newlyweds). Save this, and an obligatory ablution on the day before communion, the document does not mention any specific preparatory fast or prayer-rule. Pre-Eucharistic ablution may have had some baptismal overtones, since according to Niphont participation in the Eucharist was an obligatory part of the rite of Baptism, which was further confirmed by the Synod in Vladimir in 1274 AD.

In the "Questions of Kirik of Novgorod" there is, though, a mention of practice of keeping a penitential fast for 40 days by those who otherwise continued to live in fornication, but Niphont stands against admitting such people to communion regardless the length of their fasting. There are also a few mentions of communion on Easter which seems to be the day when most of the people were going to participate; some of them communicated three days in a row, adding paschal Monday and Tuesday to Easter itself.

The oldest extant Russian Euchologion, *Syn604*, of the beginning of the 13th c., attests two prayers, one for Easter, and another for Nativity, which were to be read over those who were going to communicate after keeping a 40-days fast. (These prayers are found in many later manuscripts). This contradicts what we said about the practice of frequent communion described in the "Questions of Kirik of Novgorod". One should conclude that either by the 13th century the Russians switched to the practice of receiving communion only after a lengthy fast, either the practice in Novgorod was different from those on Volyn', from where *Syn604* originates. The former explanation seems to be more natural, because since the mid-12th century the metropolitan see in Kiev was occupied mostly by hierarchs that for some reason represented a specific group of Constantinopolitan clergy adhering to rigorous ascetic ideals, as Andrey Vinogradov and myself have shown elsewhere.

In 1395, the Kievan metropolitan Cyprian wrote a canonical letter from Moscow, including instructions on the actual rite of administering communion to laymen. According to his letter, in a church this could only be performed on Easter and on Nativity; otherwise, only

sick persons can receive in their homes. Another important detail is that Cyprian mentions the figure of a spiritual father who allows — or does not allow — one to dare approaching the altar after giving him a prayer (I have already mentioned such prayers): male communicants receive the Body of Christ in the royal doors, while females should wait for their turn at the side door.

In another letter by the same Metropolitan, containing canonical responses to hegumen Athanasios Vysotsky the Elder, Cyprian insists on completing the special rule of prayers before communion. This means reading the well-known Akolouthia of Holy Communion, which has developed in Byzantium in the 12–13th centuries and is first attested in the Slavonic manuscripts in the 14th century. In the same letter Cyprian mentions that monks are allowed to communicate not just on Easter and Nativity, as the laymen, but also during the four long fasts, if their hegumen does not mind. This exceedingly strict eucharistic discipline became normative in Rus' until the early 18th century.

## 2. The "Classical" Practice

By the 17th century, the regular Russian practice was to receive communion once a year, in the Great Lent. During the regular fast the communicants held a week of xerophagia, which literally means "unboiled food", but was understood by the Russians as strictly vegetarian meals without adding a trace of oil, whether boiled or not, but necessarily eaten cold. The process of keeping such week was called *govenie* (= awe, reverence). During their *govenie* the believers tried to attend every church service, and also read the so-called *pravilnye kanony*, three hymnographical kanons a day (illiterate persons repeated the Jesus prayer for thousands of times and made hundreds of bowings instead). After a week of *govenie*, the communicants went to confession before their spiritual father, and there was no guarantee that he would allow everyone to receive communion. Everyone was expected to go to one and the same spiritual father for years; appeal to another one was prohibited. Those admitted to participate read the lengthy service of Holy Communion early in the morning and then went to the Eucharistic celebration to finally partake of the Divine Sacrament.

In such conditions, the perception of the Eucharistic service celebrated on a weekly, or — in the monasteries and big cathedrals, on a daily basis (the celebrating priests received communion without an additional fast, though they were also expected to read all the preparatory kanons and prayers) could not be any other than highly mystical. Such perception was firmly supported by the "Liturgy Interpreted" — a commentary which I mentioned before, where the celebration is presented as an invisible angelic drama, the acts of which follow the earthly liturgical rite, and which culminates when the angels slaughter the Divine Child during the priest's ekphosis, "Sancta Sanctis". Such apocalyptic interpretation, though, by no means was the only way of speculating on the Eucharist. The acquaintance of the communicants with the pure and authentic Biblical theology of the Sacrament was safeguarded by the fact that the preparatory prayers before communion included pericopes from the 1st epistle to Corinthians, from the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John, and a few psalms.

The practice of an extremely strict pre-communion fast was so regular that it even entered the Russian Typikon, and despite the liturgical reform of the 2nd half of the 17th century, the chapter in question is still there, even in the modern editions. Nevertheless, the reform brought

new ideas with it. The pre-communion prayers, as well as the liturgical formulary itself, were shortened, and even visually the rite of Eucharistic celebration in some ways changed.

In order to advocate his reforms and meanwhile to deepen the understanding of the Eucharist by the Russians, patriarch Nikon published a translation of Nicholas Kabasilas' commentary on the Divine Liturgy, being the best Byzantine treatment of the Eucharist, which was for the first time translated into Slavonic. But it happened that after deposition of Nikon the Byzantine Eucharistic theology gave way to a Roman Catholic one. Due to a powerful impact of the Ukrainian theological school (which, in its turn, was strongly influenced by the Roman Catholic theology), and of Ukrainian ecclesiastical culture on the Muscovites in the 2nd half of the 17th century, Russian liturgical books of this period began to treat the eucharistic Words of Institution as consecratory, and to deny the consecration of chalice on the liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, since it does not contain these words. Finally, this change produced a scandal (in the literature it is known as *Chlebopoklonnaya yeres'*, The Heresy of Adoring the [still unconsecrated] Bread), which lasted in 1670–1680, until the issue was resolved in the 1690 with stressing the consecratory power of the epiklesis. (The Presanctified Liturgy, though, remained in its altered form until now; thus, the modern Russian way of celebrating this rite differs from that of the Greeks and of the Russian old-believers, who kept the original practice).

Another example of Latin influence is an instructive chapter, called *Izvestie uchitelnoe* (Exemplary Statement), introduced into the Russian Liturgikon in the 1670s and corrected in the 1690s. Its text is a reworking of didactic rubrics from the Euchologion of the Kievan metropolitan Peter (Mohila), printed in Kiev in 1646. The Muscovites seemed to be completely unaware of the fact that these rubrics were actually a slightly revised translation of rubrics from the Roman Missal. Among them there were two directives which in an obvious way contradicted the rigorous eucharistic discipline the Russians were used to. One of them prescribed the altar boys to communicate "often", another one told that a week-length of *govenie* was not obligatory, and that three days or just a single day would suffice. Besides that, the late-17th-century Russian editors of the Liturgikon also introduced there a short chapter concerning daily reading of the kanons. According to this chapter, instead of reading three kanons a day during the whole week before communion, one could just read the three kanons once. All this was foreshadowing strong changes to come in the Russian Eucharistic piety.

A significant move in this direction was made by tsar Peter the Great, who ordered that every Christian Orthodox citizen should communicate once a year. Those in the civil or military service were even obliged to present a certificate to their authorities each year, confirming that they went to confessions and communion. Such measures were justified by struggle with the old-believers schism which struck the Russian Church. Another measure was the cancellation of the institution of spiritual fathers; now the Orthodox Christians should go to confessions simply to the parish church they were assigned to. The duty of annual communion meant that no one was subjected to a long excommunication anymore. Many people who otherwise carelessly did not go to communion for years, now were obliged to change their attitude. This, however, did not turn the Eucharist into the center of spiritual life of the Russian Orthodoxy. This happened only later.

During the period of the Russian empire, the extra-rigorous practice of older times survived only among the old-believers. Ordinary Orthodox Christians did not keep a week of xerophagia anymore, enjoying the Lenten but hot food. The first Saturday of Great Lent became the regular day of yearly communion for most people. They kept the first week of the Lent, communicated; many thereafter ceased keeping Lent until the Holy week. The most pious people kept the whole Lent and then communicated once again on Holy Thursday. No one at all (save the celebrating clergy) was expected to partake during the Presanctified Liturgies (this could be explained by theological uncertainties I have mentioned before), neither on Easter, despite its significance as *the* day of communion in the medieval times. The explanation is that Easter was understood as a day of feast (including excessive drinking of alcohol), and by no means a day of fast and penitence which were associated with communion. The paschal service should be conducted quickly and lively, without the need of interrupting it for confessions and tolerating long queues of communicants.

Outside of the Great Lent virtually nobody went to communion, except the day of his or her patronal saint. There were some exceptions, though, especially among the monks, when this or that pious person dared to communicate during each of the four long fasting periods of the year, or even monthly.

Theologically, the Eucharist during the times of the Russian Empire was understood more or less in the terms of Roman Catholic scholasticism, corrected in this or that way in order to fit the Orthodox liturgical tradition and practice. The apocryphal commentaries of visionary character have been mostly forgotten. The Eucharist itself was understood as an essential part of church dogmatic teaching, but personal participation in it was much more a question of private piety than a means of building the ecclesiastic community.

### *3. The Changes Brought by the 20th Century*

The religious revival of the so-called Russian Silver Age in the very beginning of the 20th century brought with it many ideas, among them the renewed attitude towards the Eucharist. Another very important development was the great advance in scholarly studies, including the liturgical history, made by such great Russian scholars as Nikolay Krasnoseltsev, Alexey Dmitrievsky, Ivan Karabinov, and others.

The religious revival of the Russian Silver Age was mostly only intellectual, and it was colored by romanticism. Let me quote a famous verse written by a great Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, in 1915:

Here is the discos, like a golden sun —  
A blessed moment — in the air it stands —  
The world is held in time like apple in one's hands —  
Here will be heard only the Grecian tongue.

A solemn zenith of the service to God's will,  
Light of round cupolas glows in July,  
That with full chest, outside of time we sigh

Of endless meadows where all time stands still.

Like noon eternal is the Eucharist —  
All drink the cups, all play and sing aloud,  
Before the eyes of all the cup of God  
Pours with a gaiety that can't desist.

Another great Russian poet, Alexander Block, wrote in 1905 another, even more famous verse:

The girl was singing in a church choir,  
About the weary abroad, far away,  
About the ships in the sea, so dire,  
And those who'd forgotten their happy day.

So sweet was her voice flying up into highness  
With shimmering beam on her shoulder of white,  
And every one listened watching from darkness  
The way the white garment was singing in light.

And every one thought that the joy was there,  
That the ships were all in a quiet bay,  
And the weary people abroad, full of care,  
Were now all blessed with a happy day.

The voice was sweet, and the beam was shining,  
And only up there at the royal rack  
A child, conversant with secret, was crying  
That nobody, really, would ever come back.

Let me also quote one more verse by Block, written in 1902:

Resigning to the tender brows,  
Admiring the charm of all  
I throw a bunch of snow-white flowers  
Into the churchyard, across the wall.

And then the hazy screen will fall and  
The [heavenly] Bridegroom will step down the shrine.  
And from the forest border onward  
The wedding day will break and shine.

It is very characteristic that neither Mandelstam nor Block very living an active ecclesiastical life. They beheld the powerful symbolism of the Eucharist, but had very little experience of the sacrament itself, as was the case for most of the nominal Russian Orthodox people of that period.

The turning point of everything and for everyone was the Russian revolution of 1917. Initially, the poets and thinkers understood it as a powerful mark of the upcoming revival of the Russian spirit. The same Alexander Block even wrote a poem, called "The Twelve", where a gang of revolutionary sailors is matched none other than the twelve apostles. The poem ends as follows:

Behind them follows the hungry dog,  
Ahead of them – with bloody banner,  
Unseen within the blizzard's swirl,  
Safe from any bullet's harm,  
With gentle step,  
above the storm,  
In the scattered, pearl-like snow,  
Crowned with a wreath of roses white,  
Ahead of them – goes Jesus Christ.

But very soon the Russian people found out that instead of revival and ending of the severe war in the West they got the humiliating peace treaty with Germany, the civil war in Russia itself, the rejection of territories, and, finally, the terrible terror of the new Communist government directed towards virtually everyone. Religion was proclaimed a relic of the past and was to be eradicated. Already in 1918 the Russian poet Sergey Yesenin felt this as follows:

I will not fear the doom,  
Nor the spears, nor the arrows of rains,  
So proclaims according to the Bible  
The prophet Yesenin Sergey.

My time has already come,  
I am not afraid of the clank of the knout.  
The Body, the Body of Christ,  
I spit it out of my mouth.

...

The Communists imprisoned and executed thousands and thousands of the Orthodox clergymen and laymen. The ecclesiastical hierarchy was nearly completely destroyed. And in these conditions, the Eucharist, finally, became what it should be — the center of life of a Christian community. But now it was often celebrated not in beautifully decorated splendid

churches, but in prison cells and on wooden stamps in the forests around the concentrating camps. Those who escaped imprisonment gathered together in private houses or in sparse churches that have not been requisitioned by the state.

In such circumstances the Eucharist truly became the center of the spiritual life. The similar developments happened in the Russian emigrant circles. But the strict preparation rules still remained: during most of the 20th century the Russian way of going to communion was keeping a 3-days fast, attending services and reading 3 kanons during this period of time, finally going to confessions and reading the Akolouthia of Holy Communion.

After the fall of the Soviet Union Russia and other countries of the former Soviet state experienced a decade of strong spiritual rebirth. Yet the rules of preparation to communion I have just described are still remaining very active. In our days there still are some places where, for example, the Orthodox clergy refuses to administer the Holy communion during the Easter service.

But on a par with this old practice is now very much widespread a different approach based primarily on the works of Alexander Schmemmann. Here it is necessary to make a reservation: Schmemmann is often considered almost as a prophet. But in fact one can easily discover that his views are highly dependent on those of Gregory Dix, an Anglican scholar, who, in his turn, was an influential theologian, but by no means a pioneer. His work, "The Shape of the Liturgy", was on the one hand, a continuation of the studies of earlier Anglican liturgical scholars associated with the so-called High Church, on the other hand, it was an Anglican response to the developments inside the Roman Catholic "Liturgical Movement". Therefore, ideas of Schmemmann and other representatives of the "Paris School" concerning the Eucharist betray a strong influence of the modern Roman Catholic and partly Anglican thinking on the subject.

Nowadays, in the crowded parishes of Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large Russian cities, many people partake of the Holy Gifts very often (if one judges by the old standards): two, three, four times a month, and even more frequently. In the 2015 the Council of all bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church has issued an official document, entitled "On the Participation of Christians in the Eucharist", which recommends to go to communion frequently, and which speaks of the optional character of preparatory fasting and reading kanons before the liturgy. Even confessions are proclaimed optional for those who have a spiritual father and have received his blessing for this, despite the strong Russian tradition of always going to confessions before communion. Only two things are still required in an ordinary situation: abstaining from any food and drink from midnight until communion (or at least for six hours before communion), abstaining from marital relations on a day and a night before communion, and reading the Akolouthia of Holy Communion.

The shepherds of the Church rejoice at the heart when they see how many people approach the Holy Cup. There is, however, a reverse side of this process. The omnipresent spirit of consumerism has entered the ecclesiastical life as well. People like when they are given something in a church, be it holy water, a candle — or the holy communion, but they are much less interested in faith, in asceticism, in the deeds of mercy, in participation in community life. Many parents lead their children to the Communion, hoping that this will help in their

upbringing, but at the same time they themselves live almost no Christian life. During the evening services, when there is no Communion, but when there are read and sang many beautiful biblical passages and Christian hymns, one finds in the church much fewer praying people than during the Communion service.

Therefore, people often do not understand that though Holy Communion is probably the most important tool of spiritual life, it is still just a tool, and not the only content of this life. And the shepherds of the Church do not have time to explain it to the people either because of the lack of time, or because of the insufficient understanding of the pastors themselves of their activities.

### *Conclusion*

In its thousand-year history, the Russian Church has come a long way, also with regard to the Eucharist. For many centuries it considered the Eucharist more from the mystical and highly ascetic perspective, but in the late 19th and then the 20th century it made a great contribution to the understanding of the Eucharist, due to the works of the great Russian liturgists and theologians of that times. In particular, the theologians of the Russian emigration had a decisive influence on the movement for the revival and transformation of the Eucharistic life throughout the Orthodox Church in general.

Today the Russian Church undoubtedly undergoes a Eucharistic revival, although it is associated with certain diseases of growth — above all, an overly individualistic attitude to the Eucharist. A recognition of the fact that the Eucharist is not just one of the sacraments of the Church, but the center of the whole life of every church community, which cannot be limited only to ritual activity, is a prerequisite for the further spread of Christian mission in Russia and beyond.