

# The Significance of the Eucharist in Orthodoxy

Angelo Nicolaides

## ABSTRACT

The work of Our Saviour was to redeem us from corruption, sin and death. He redeemed us all through His assumption of our human nature on the day of His incarnation. He did however also deify human nature by His divine teachings, His absolutely unattainable example and especially by His death at Golgotha and His Resurrection. We are all therefore liberated from eternal damnation by His appearance, as well as by His actions. Since God who was manifested infused Himself as it were into humanity and became man, so we men are deified by the Word as being taken to Him by His flesh and inherit life eternal. Deification is thus passed on to all who are saved and who comprise the mystical body of Christ. Consecrated bread and wine are the sacramental signs of Christ's sacrifice. If we partake in them we enter into a communion of life with Jesus Christ.

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## Introduction

This paper has been predicated on the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the "true God" and the special means by which God's kingship over mankind is brought to fruition. Only by accepting that Jesus is of God, can we comprehend that He loves us so much that He gave Himself for us and that through Him we may be saved from damnation. The Orthodox Church exists as a "living sacramental and spiritual tradition, mystically actualized in her liturgy, realized in her saints, witnessed by her martyrs, defended by her confessors, articulated by her fathers and councils and always protected and preserved by the entire body of her members" (Hopko : 1999).

Orthodox Christians believe they are saved at baptism but need to continue to "work" for salvation by loving and obeying the teachings of Our Master Jesus Christ. In Jeremiah 3 : 14, God tells us: "*I am married to you*". Our relationship with God is thus like a marriage in which God wants our total commitment and love. We need to therefore work out our "marriage" with God so that it can work out. We need to yield to Him and display total obedience as we strive for *Theosis* and try to become Christ-like. Our redemption includes His establishment of His

church as a vessel of salvation. It is via the church that anyone can subjectively make salvation his own by partaking in the sacraments and by faith which show themselves by good works through love, by Grace (Chrysostom : Homily on Genesis 16:5, 25:7). These teachings are incorporated into the Nicene Creed and are the teachings of Orthodoxy, made simple through liturgical worship. This is in contrast to the West's legalistic concept of salvation as promulgated by St Anselm of Canterbury and brought down to us in Orthodoxy by men such as Athanasius the Great, the mystical concept of salvation of St Paul and the Apostles.

We must repent and give ourselves totally to God in heart, mind and will. Only in this way can we be saved from ourselves and sin and death. We can only find true contentment in Jesus Christ and a real relationship with Him. Jesus tells us: *"Peace I leave with you....my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you"* (John 14 : 27). Jesus came especially to deliver us from evil and the bondage of sin. He came as a doctor to heal us from our infirmity. We become ill and fall spiritually and needed someone to raise us up. Thank the Almighty for His Son who came not to judge us but to free us who are captives of sin and death. Thus in Orthodoxy, salvation comes to us by means of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and by His assumption of humanity which He linked to His Divinity. *"...this is the reason for the sojourn of Christ in the flesh, the pattern-life described in the Gospels, the sufferings, the Cross, the tomb and the Resurrection; so that man who is being saved through the imitation of Christ, might receive that adoption"*. (Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*)

Orthodoxy believes that God's richest gift for believers is to share with them His life. The incarnation of Jesus served the purpose of restoring our relationship with God. Jesus offers us freedom from egoism, selfishness, greed and from the fear of death itself. Jesus frees us from ourselves so that we can become the people He created us to be and intends for us to become. He gives us hope where we despair and allows us to grow in God and for God through His Divine

power. Each believer is involved in moving closer and closer to God in a deification process called *Theosis*. This process occurs within the context of the *Ekklesia*. We need to strive to restore and renew God's image that is within ourselves and fulfill our destiny which is to become like God. Christ frees us from sin so that we can partake in the life of God. We are called to “become partakers of the Divine Nature” (2 Peter 1 : 4). We therefore strive to “put on Christ” and receive the Holy Spirit through prayer and the other Sacraments so as to live in unity with Jesus Christ and in total communion with the *Paraclete*.

The Holy Eucharist is by far the very oldest experience of Christian Worship as practiced in the Early Church. In the *Didache*, a text of the early Church written in the first century, believers thank God “for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you have made known to us through Jesus your Son” (Didache 9:3). The word Eucharist comes from the Greek word ‘*efcharistia*’ which means thanksgiving. Its origins are traced to the Mystical Last Supper at which Christ ordered His disciples to offer bread and wine in memory of Him. It is through the Eucharist that the *Ekklesia* gathers to remember and celebrate each Sunday, Jesus Christ’s Life, Death, and Resurrection. This is where we approach the Most High with all our will, mind, soul and body and serve Him in spirit and in truth.

In the Orthodoxy, the Eucharist is also known as the Divine Liturgy. The word liturgy implies the work of people and this description emphasizes the corporate character of the Eucharist ([www.goarch.org](http://www.goarch.org)). When an Orthodox believer attends the Divine Liturgy on a Sunday morning or on a feast day, it is not as an individual believer who simply attends to hear a traditional sermon. Rather, he comes as a member of the *Ekklesia* and he participates in the very essence of the Holy Church, which is the Worship of the Trinitarian Godhead. The Eucharist is the centre of the Orthodox belief and it embodies the Christian faith in a very unique way. The Eucharistic food in which believers partake, and which was willed by the Lord and entrusted to His *Ekklesia*, enables us to enter

into a oneness with the Lord and we become the *Ekklesia*. Christ's sacrifice becomes the sacrifice of those who partake of the Holy Communion of the Eucharist and it is essentially a Church activity for building itself. The act of making the past a present reality anticipates for us the future glory of His Kingdom. "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, (so) walk ye in him:" (Colossians 2:6)

Naturally, the fountain of the Eucharistic pray is the mystery of the Holy Eucharist who's starting point is the sacrifice of the Son and Logos of God on Golgotha by Pontius Pilate for our salvation. In this way "*He who has the Son has Life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life*" (1 John 5 : 12).

### **What was the purpose of His redemptive work?**

The Greek Church Fathers and virtually all the theologians in Orthodoxy, in contrast to those of the West, emphasize more forcefully the Crucifixion of Jesus. They praise the following aspects of His redemptive work:

- The Incarnation –through which Christ assumed our human nature in its entirety and united it with the Divine nature, thus freeing it from corruption.
- His Divine teachings and moral laws which enlightened humanity.
- His ultimate sacrifice at Golgotha by which He became the Paschal Lamb that allows us to be freed from sin and reconciled with the Father.
- His Resurrection, by which He demonstrated His omnipotence and also raised us to life and then ascended to be seated at the right-hand of the Father – and establishing His Church or *Ekklesia* to continue His work while invisibly controlling her.
- Each time we celebrate a Eucharist, we apply to ourselves the redemption that emanates from the Lord's sacrifice for us and His Glorious Resurrection and this bears testament to the reality that God is with us.

### **How is it that we are saved?**

Man is the only creature of God's which was given a spiritual and a moral nature in the image of God Himself and We are saved by God's Grace through faith, and it is the Divine Incarnation which inaugurates our salvation. In this way Jesus "*Being the first-fruit of mankind*" (Cyril of Alexandria : 16:6-7) and assuming human nature in totality "*assuming to Himself the first-fruits of man's compound nature*", cleaned and sanctified it and deified it, making it part of the Divine Nature. This is a gift from God whereas sin gives "wages". "*For by Grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - not because of works, lest any man should boast*" (Ephesians 2 : 8). God pours His Mercy out on humanity – this is Grace. He unconditionally offers us forgiveness even though we are unworthy. He accepts us as His children in Baptism and fills us with the *Paraclete* in Confirmation. Although "*A mystical communion with our Lord Jesus Christ is granted to believers in the Holy sacrament of baptism*" (Theophan the Recluse : The Path of Prayer), this is not a guarantee that one is in communion with God. One may also pray and partake in the Divine Liturgy and still not be in communion with the Lord. Fortunately, He sends Jesus to live in our hearts through the Eucharist-Holy Communion. "*God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*" (Romans 5 : 8). In terms of Ephesians 2:6, "And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus," human nature was lifted up and sat at the right hand of the Father in the person of Jesus Christ," because "our entire nature was contained in the Hypostasis of Christ." (Gregory : Letter 101). If we have faith we accept God's gracious gift for us, which is salvation: "By Grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2 : 8). According to Gregory Nazianzus, the Lord Incarnate "*May sanctify humanity, and be, as it were, a leaven to the whole lump; and by uniting Himself to that which was condemned may release it from all condemnation, becoming for all men all things that we are, except sin.*" (Gregory Nazianzus : Oration 30).

In Jesus Christ, while he was both man and God, we see the entire Godhead bodily, a Trinitarian Godhead (see Colossians 2:9), one God, one essence, one being, and one Divine Spirit who is indivisible which manifests Himself eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By seeking communion with God we make ourselves more able to attain it. We should do all for the glory of God as in this we make certain that we are constantly in communion with Him. We must be careful that we harbour no ill in our hearts, for if we do, we cannot be in communion with God. "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one." (1 John 5:4-8)

Jesus Christ is the new Adam, and the image of God which had been disfigured by the old Adam, becomes restored and renovated (Methodius : P.G. 18, 329). Thus once we accept Jesus Christ and are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, we begin a new existence which is expressed through love and good deeds. If we however have faith alone without works, it is a dead faith. We thus need to care for the downtrodden in society and truly demonstrate love for those less fortunate than ourselves. This does not mean that we obtain special favour but rather that we are doing what we are expected to do: "...*we have only done what was our duty*" (Luke 17 : 10). Our good deeds do not place God in our debt. It is only God's love for us that places us eternally in His debt. Good works do not provide us with salvation. Rather, salvation produces good works. We are thus saved for good works as Jesus makes us a new creation from which flow good deeds.

We are thus saved from sin and death through being baptised which is our personal Golgotha. This is called Justification. As we repent our sins and walk with Jesus we become saved by Sanctification. When Jesus returns we shall partake in His Glorification. Salvation is clearly a dynamic process towards *Theosis* in which we receive the fullness of God's life. Man is saved to love his neighbour and to bear fruit and serve humanity. If we wish to become partakers in divine nature we must confess Christ to others and become "fishers of men". God's gift of Grace, through our faith, allows us to be saved. Thus in the person of Jesus, the hypostatic and eternal union of the Divine and human natures took place and He saved and freed our human nature, which was assumed by the Incarnate *Logos*, so that all of us being "...released by His flesh, were freed" (St Athanasius : 61) .

In John 16:7 we read, "*Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.*" The Comforter or Paraclete is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides and protects us and intercedes for us, having given our Ekklesia life on the day of Pentecost. He endows us with a variety of spiritual gifts for our illumination and satisfaction. This is why we invoke the Holy Spirit in times of happiness or sorrow to strengthen our faith and through the Grace of Jesus Christ to accomplish our purpose in life. Our Christian faith is the greatest spiritual gift we can be given. We should consequently dedicate ourselves to the true practice of our faith and not allow ourselves to be led astray by secular and materialistic enticements. Gregory of Nyssa states "*By the dispensation of His Grace He disseminates Himself in every believer through that flesh whose substance comes from bread and wine, blending Himself with the bodies of believers, to secure that, by this union with the immortal, man too, may be a sharer in incorruption*" (Gregory of Nyssa :The Great Catechism). When God made us He intended us to be vessels and temples of His Holy Spirit and He wishes to be related to us in an intimate and personal relationship. Jesus is our Baptizer, Redeemer and Saviour. He is the only begotten Son of the Father's

essence and is one with the essence of the Father. The Evangelist John tells us : *“No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him”* (John 1 : 18). Christ is thus of the same nature and essence of the Father. 1 John emphasizes this fact : *“And we know that the Son of God is come...This is the True God, and eternal life.”* (1John 5 : 20). Jesus says clearly that : *“...I am the Truth, and the Life...”* (John 14 : 6). In John 1 : 1 we read : *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* (John 1 : 1). This passage makes it clear to us that at the beginning of creation, the Word or *Logos*, was inseparable from the Father.

In fact Christ has a dual nature and is both God and man.

Jesus was the Son of God = God  
and simultaneously  
Jesus was the Son of Man= man.

Jesus is thus a God-man who is equal to His Father in essence and nature. They are in fact one being. *“I and my Father are one”* (John 10 : 30). Furthermore, when Philip asks to see Christ’s Father, Christ replies: *“He that hath seen me hath seen the Father”* (John 14 : 9). Christ thus states that He is one essence with the Father. This confession was enough for the Jews to want Him to be crucified. Jesus did not see his human side as making Him less than equal with the Father. Paul tells us : *“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God”* (Philippians 2 : 6).

Christ is constant hence the Hebrew name Yahua/Joshua. *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning”* (James 1 : 17). God the Father has been the eternal Father from the beginning and has always existed along with the Son.



Jesus says : *"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, The Almighty"* (Revelation 1 : 8).

The Holy Spirit is a very distinct part of the Triune Godhead. On the day of Pentecost, God poured out His Holy Spirit *"on all flesh"* (Acts 2 : 17). Our spiritual life is life in and by the Holy Spirit. He proceeds from the Father into the world through Christ so that we humans can fulfill God's will in our lives and become Christ-like. He has special characteristics and a special persona. He has a special name and is called the *Paraclete* (Comforter). *"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost"* (John 15 : 26). Jesus tells His disciples that the Comforter will come in his place. The Comforter is an intelligent person who speaks : *"...Thus saith the Holy Spirit..."* (Acts 21 : 11). The Holy Spirit has a personal pronoun, namely "He". Some examples of this may be found in the following verses of Holy Scripture:

*"He will reprove the world"* (John 16 : 8)

*"He shall glorify Me"* (John 16 : 14)

*"He shall testify of Me"* (John 15 : 26)

The Holy Spirit can also investigate and grieve as is shown in the two verses which follow: *"...The Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God"* (1 Corinthians 2 : 10). *"And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God."* (Ephesians 4 : 30). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit has His own opinions about things : *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit..."* (Acts 15 : 28). It is blasphemous to speak against the Holy Spirit: *"...But whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come."* (Matthew 12 : 32). According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov (19<sup>th</sup> Century), the essence of life is to acquire the Holy Spirit of God without which there is no meaningful life for man.

The Holy Spirit is God as is stated in Acts 5 : 3-4 : *“But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled then heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?...Thou hast not lied unto men but unto God”*. We cannot claim to believe in God the Father if we fail to see that He, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are one. God wants us to know that He has three essences: *“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28 : 19). God is thus Trinitarian- three persons in one and Christ revealed this to us. The Holy Spirit as the third Person of the Holy Trinity is of the same essence and equal in rank to the Father and the Son: *“And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree”* (1 John 5 : 7-8).

The Triune Godhead is an expression of the essence of the Orthodox Faith. Salvation begins with the Father who *“so loved the world”* that He sent His Son to die for our transgressions and thus save us. Our salvation is completed by the Holy Spirit who descended at Pentecost. The Trinitarian belief makes God knowable as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and thus accessible as One who comes to us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

### **What should we do?**

We should: *“Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with perseverance”* and *“Finally be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil”* (Ephesians 6 : 18; 6 : 10-11). By prayer we call on His Divine power and by His Grace we are deified and brought back to the road of perfection and salvation. As we can think and reason and have self awareness or *gnosis* we can have a fellowship with God in a spiritual life given to us from above by the righteousness of God, through Jesus life and ministry.

Our Holy Scriptures emphasize over and over that God the Father raised up Jesus Christ. Christ gave His life for us without any reservation to God who then gave it back in His Resurrection from the dead. As the unblemished Paschal Lamb, He bore our sins in His body on a tree and washed away our sins with His blood. Jesus took for Himself a share in our poor and weak nature, in order that He might cleanse us and make us incorruptible and establish us once more as partakers of his Divinity (John Damascene : Exposition of the Orthodox Faith). We believe in the real death of Christ and in His actual Resurrection from the dead. He redeemed us by His supreme sacrifice and His blood was our ransom. So by God's grace we are once again adopted as his sons. In 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 we read: *"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."* We are called on to partake of the Holy Eucharist regularly, *"But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, (even) to them that believe on His name:"* (John 1:12)

### **What of the Resurrection?**

Christ rose from the dead restoring the communion of grace between God and man. The angel of God moved the stone from the tomb of Jesus to show that Jesus was no longer in the tomb (Matthew 28). Once resurrected, the Messiah was in a new and glorious form and appeared at various places immediately. He was difficult to recognize (John 20 : 14) and ate to demonstrate that He was not an apparition (Luke 24 : 30, 39). He even allows Himself to be touched by others (John 21 : 9). He appears amongst the disciples when the doors are shut (John

20: 19, 26) and vanishes before them (Luke 24 : 31). Christ rose but He was now full of divinity and full of life in the new form of the eternal Kingdom of God (Hopko: 1981). His Resurrection erased our sins and dominated the living and the dead. He established the sanctification of the entire world and freed us from demonic influence. He then made Himself known to His disciples after His death and calls on our hope through His voice and actions. We are called on to proclaim His gospel and spread the experience of growing in the Grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (Chrysostom : Homilies on Second Corinthians, Homily 5).

The Resurrection of Jesus is the first-fruits of the resurrection of the whole of humanity. It basically fulfills Psalm 16 : 10 *“For Thou doest not give me up unto Sheol (death), or let thy Godly one see corruption”*. Christ fulfills all our hopes and expectations. So God, by becoming man, assumed and united Himself with, and deified man’s nature, which up until that time was divorced from communion with the Father (Karmiris : 1973). Man, a sinner, could once again enter God’s presence. In essence then, Orthodox Soteriology became Christology. Jesus thus turned back humanity which had fallen (Cyril of Alexandria : Migne P.G. 74, 753). The basis of the union and deification of man with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist is the hypostatic unity of the human nature of the *‘Theanthropos’* (God-Man). As Jesus put on a human body, so we are deified by the incarnate *Logos*, as being taken to Him by His flesh. We thus inherit life eternal. Irenaeus taught that God, the *Logos* incarnate *“in compendionobis salutem praestans, ut quod perdideramus in Adam, id est secundum imaginem et similitudinem esse Dei, hoc in Christo Jesu recipamus...”* and the Word *“factus est quod sumus nos, ut nos perficeret esse quod est ipse...ut et homo fieret participes Dei.”* (Irenaeus : Against Heresies).

*“Thus says the Lord God : Behold I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people...And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, O my people...And I will put my Spirit within you and you shall*

*live...*" (Ezekiel 37 : 12-14) Eastern Fathers see the God-Man redeemer as the God-man head of a living organism, mankind, from which the Head Divine Life is diffused to all Christians: members who abide in Christ as branches of a vine, of whom the Divine Husbandman is God the father, according to the well known parable in St. John's Gospel (John 15 : 1).

In the resurrected and glorified body of Jesus was resurrected the entire human physical nature, which was renewed, glorified and liberated from corruption. Every member of His Mystical Body was resurrected. He made us pass from death to life eternal, from earth to heaven. He told us to partake of His Body and his Blood. St Ignatius of Antioch, speaking of the Eucharist, tells us *"the only bread that is medicine for immortality, an antidote against death, food for life eternal in Jesus Christ"* (St Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Ephesius*, 20, 2). In Him alone do we find salvation and neither is there salvation in any other. There is simply no other name given under heaven whereby we must be saved. People today wishing to live lives that are not ephemeral, need to take cognizance of the words of Jesus, *"Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up for the last day"* (John 6: 54). The relationship of partaking in the Holy Eucharist is interpreted and understood as knowledge of Christ , because it is knowledge-knowledge engendered by and manifested as an intimate relationship (Fitzgerald : 2007). *"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement. Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:"* (Romans 5:8-12).

“Come let us return to the Lord : For He has torn that He may heal us; He has stricken and He will bind us up, After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him” (Hosea 6 : 1-2).

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**BIO:** Angelo Nicolaides is an ordained member of the Greek Cypriot Church and Professor at Vaal University of Technology, Johannesburg, South Africa. Prior essays on

Orthodox approaches to celibacy and the role of women are available in earlier AEJT issues.

**Email:** [Pythagoras13@hotmail.com](mailto:Pythagoras13@hotmail.com)