

The Mysteries & Symbol

*Humanity is the priest of Creation who
alone turns everything Into
Communion with God through
Thanksgiving & Glorification*

Western Theology teaches Creation is Subordinate to Humanity

- “The American historian Lynn White was right to attribute the causes of the problem (the ecological problem -the relationship between organisms and their environment) to Christian theology, particularly of the Western Church, which exploited Genesis containing God’s order to the first human beings to dominate the earth (“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over...all the earth...Gen 1:26)...a theology that stressed the superiority of humans because of their ‘rationality’ ... such a rationalistic approach detached human beings from the rest of creation and encouraged them to look down with contempt on whatever is not rational, not human.” (Met. John Zizioulas, Ecological Asceticism: a Cultural Revolution”

Orthodox World View – the Sacredness of all Creation, every living thing

- ❖ Nature (creation) acquires sacredness only in and through the human person.
- ❖ Humanity has a decisive importance and responsibility
- ❖ A human is the priest of Creation as he or she freely turns it into a vehicle of communion with God and fellow human beings.
- ❖ Material creation is not treated as a means of obtaining pleasure and happiness.
- ❖ Creation is a sacred gift from God which is meant to foster and promote communion with God and with others.
- ❖ “Ecological Asceticism”: sacredness of material creation (not to be exploited for personal gratification -natural resources are limited) and the human body (*As priests* – by offering thanksgiving and Glory to God turn creation into communion with the Divine or, *As Consumers* - eat, drink and be merry)
- ❖ Love of God’s creation and our fellow human beings would lead us naturally to restrict the consumption of natural resources and share them more justly with other people.

(Met. John Zizioulas, Ecological Asceticism: A Cultural Revolution”

“All things were created through Him, and for Him, He is before all things, and in Him, all things hold together (Col 1:15-20)

A “sacred world-view” is “Other-Centered” it finds its significance and meaning in and through Christ

“What is a merciful heart? It is a heart that is burning with love for the whole of creation: for humans, for birds, for beasts, for demons – for all God’s creatures (Isaac the Syrian).”

Love for Creation smashes the self-centered, secular world-view

“...love all God’s creation, the whole of it, and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. (Fr. Zossima, Brothers Karamazov)

“For we constitute a part of creation and should never be considered apart from it, much less to set ourselves up over or against it” (Chryssavgis, Beyond the Shattered Image)

Orthodoxy & Cosmic Transfiguration

“The distinct accent in the Orthodox tradition has always been on the theme of cosmic transfiguration, especially evident in the liturgical texts for Theophany.”

Chryssavgis

“So that by the elements of creation, and by the angels, and by human beings, by things visible and invisible, God’s most holy name may be glorified.”

Feast of Transfiguration

The Church is a unique Symbol

“For the Church is a unique symbol. And I use the term not as a way of perceiving reality (i.e. not as a *sign* of something else) but as a profound way of realizing and reconciling (the literal translation of the Greek *sym-bolon* is bringing together) two distinct, though not unrelated realities: divinity and creation, God and world.

(Fr. John Chryssavgis, Beyond the Shattered Image)

Interpreting the Liturgy: Symbol and Symbolism

- ❖ The divine liturgy is for all commentators virtually a symbolic representation of the life and ministry of Christ from His birth in Bethlehem to His glorious ascension to heaven.
- ❖ The so-called "Little Entrance" is the symbol of His manifestation to the world...
- ❖ "Illustrative Symbolism" is allegorical. It does not represent what is actually happening in the moment and misrepresents its' meaning. The divine liturgy becomes above all a sacred play. It is the dramatic character of the Byzantine liturgy that is being referred to in the descriptions and definitions of it as *symbolic*, as endowed with a particularly rich symbolism.
- ❖ **A simple and easily verifiable fact:** there are no references to such symbols and symbolic meanings in the liturgy itself...in the prayers in which the different rites and liturgical actions are given their verbal expression and thus their meaning.

Fr. Schmemmann: "Symbols and Symbolism in the Orthodox Liturgy"

Sources of Illustrative Symbolism

- ❖ The origin of the symbolic interpretation of the liturgy is to be found in the catechetical instructions given in preparation for baptism to the newly converted.
- ❖ This pre- and post- baptismal initiation, in turn, reflects and is patterned after the interpretation of the Holy Scripture as it develops in two main traditions: the Alexandrian which used allegory, and the Antiochian, with a more literal interpretation of texts.
- ❖ The mystical commentary is addressed to the faithful. Its purpose is to explain the mysterion, the spiritual meaning, the spiritual reality, hidden, yet present behind the visible signs and rites of the liturgy. The *Mystagogia* of the great Byzantine theologian, Saint Maximos the Confessor...it is he who by integrating them into a consistent whole prepares in many ways the ultimate triumph of (illustrative) “symbolism”
- ❖ For Saint Maximos (7C) , the liturgical symbol is validated by a consistent theology of the liturgy, which, in turn, applies to liturgy a comprehensive and consistent theological vision or reflection but it is not an explanation of the liturgy.
- ❖ Later commentators apply particular visions rather than seek in the liturgy the vision implied in its own order, in its own structures and texts, in short, in its own symbolism.

“Eschatological Symbolism”

- ❖ In the early Church - the coming of Christ was understood as the inauguration of His Kingdom, the 8th Day, the Day beyond the 7th.
- ❖ The mode of the presence in this world of the "world to come," of the Kingdom of God, is the Church-the community of those united to Christ and in Him to one another.
- ❖ The act by which the Church fulfills that presence, actualizes herself as the new people of God and the Body of Christ, is "the breaking of bread," the Eucharist, by which she ascends to Christ's table in His Kingdom
- ❖ Baptism and the Eucharist express and fulfill the Church as above all the passage, the pass-over from the old into the new; from this world into the "day without evening" of Christ's Kingdom.
- ❖ In this world the Church is in pilgrimage and expectation, and her task is to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom, the "Good News" of salvation accomplished by Christ.
- ❖ The Church can fulfill this task because she herself already has access to the kingdom of whose joy and fullness she can thus be the witness to the ends of the world.

“Eschatological Symbolism”

- ❖ Of the eschatological symbolism we can say that in it the very distinction between the sign and the signified is simply ignored.
- ❖ The whole point of the eschatological symbolism is that in it the sign and that which it signifies are one and the same thing. The liturgy, we may say, happens to us.
- ❖ The liturgical entrance is our, or rather, the Church's entrance to heaven.
- ❖ We do not symbolize the presence of the angels; we do join them in their unceasing glorification of God
- ❖ Our offering to God of the gifts of bread and wine is our sacrifice of ourselves
- ❖ The entire liturgy is the Church's ascension to Christ's table in His kingdom
- ❖ We do all this and we are all this because we are in Christ, because the Church herself is our entrance, our passage into the new eon bestowed upon us by Christ's Incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The Holy Mysteries

“Originally, sacrament is a Western word, from the Latin *Sacramentum* (to make holy). The term was used by soldiers who made an oath to the Emperor by enlisting in the army. In the 3rd C Tertulian applied the term to baptism seeing that Christians were now enlisted as soldiers in Christ’s army (Making a Catechumen).”

The term used by the Orthodox is *Mysterion* it refers not to something hidden (as in a mystery novel) but to the ways of God that are being fully revealed and yet transcend human reason (Eve Tibbs, [A Basic Guide To Eastern Orthodox Theology](#))

The Orthodox do not limit themselves to “7” mysteries because all of creation has been given to us as a means of communion and revelation of God’s presence in the world. Christ is present in all places.

THE CHURCH STANDS BEFORE THE ALTAR – THE MOMENT OF PASSAGE INTO THE WORLD TO COME

“In this world there is no altar and the temple has been destroyed. For the only altar is Christ Himself, His humanity which He has assumed and deified and made the Temple of God, the Altar of His Presence...The Altar is thus the sign that in Christ we have been given access to heaven, that the Church is the passage to heaven, the *entrance* into the heavenly sanctuary...it is the Church that enters into “Grace, and Grace means the new being, the Kingdom, the world to come.” (Schmemmann, The Eucharist)

The Church itself is a sacrament of the presence and action of Christ in the world and the *gift* of entrance into it.