

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE BYZANTINE LITURGY

The Byzantine liturgy, as it exists nowadays, is the result of the medieval evolution of the rites of the Greek speaking Church. Roughly, it was located within the limits of the Eastern Roman Empire, exactly speaking the “Byzantine” one.

Since the 9th-10th century, thanks to the work of the Saints Cyril and Methodius, patrons of Europe, and of their disciples, the Slavonic speaking Churches have adopted this rite by translating the liturgical texts into their language, old or ecclesiastical Slavonic; they also composed new prayers and brought to them some slight changes, globally respecting the cultural diversity of Slav people.

The Byzantine liturgy is organised in several celebrations, marking time and sanctifying space. **Time** and **Space** are the categories of the creation in which man’s life accomplishes itself and becomes real. Thus this life becomes totally offered and given back to the Creator. After Adam and Eve’s sin, as a matter of fact, the whole creation has fallen from original beauty, from the “beautiful” shape in which it had been made by God. The sin committed by man has not only corrupted the likeness to God and disfigured its face, but it has also dragged with it in its disfigurement the whole creation (time and space). Man is a reasonable part of this creation. He has the gift of word, so he is able to express himself, to give his voice, a word, the Word, logos, to the whole world. This voice has been made to give an answer of love to God. On the contrary, it has chosen to tell lies, to justify itself and to remain silent.

Through His incarnation, the Word of God will restore God’s work and will become Man’s word, the word of everything that is created, able to answer in a beautiful and loving way to the Creator by reconstituting and improving this original link and relationship.

Still nowadays, thanks to liturgy, the Church continues the work of the incarnated Word, Jesus Christ, by answering with love to God the Father, by establishing a loving relationship with Him.

Thanks to the Holy Liturgy, the Church takes part in a sacramental and mystical way the work of redemption and divinisation that Christ himself has accomplished: “To unify all things within Him” and to give them back to God the Father. So, the ancient beauty is recovered, man finds the beautiful shape of God (likeness) again and becomes a word again; able to answer to God with words of love.

The **time of a Byzantine liturgical day begins at midnight, with the Mesonictikon**. In the middle of the night, man gets up to praise and love God, in the silence of darkness. This prayer is of a monastic type, this is why it is not celebrated in parishes or in cathedrals, but only in monasteries.

Then the **Othros**, or matins, follow. With this prayer, we keep awake while waiting for sunrise. This prayer is celebrated in the glimmer of candles, in penumbra. Man is wrapped and meditative in darkness; the quivering of the candles prefigures the light of the Arisen; man celebrates the psalms, hymns and readings. He is waiting, such as the bride or the ten wise virgins, for the Bridegroom’s arrival. Or like the sentry who is watching for the light of dawn, the victory over darkness by the morning that will have no sunset, IC XC. As soon as the first sun rays shine on the altar, people start singing the psalms of Lauds, alternating with other songs. At the end, we sing the hymn: “Glory to God in the highest”.

After the Bride’s exultation when she recognises the Bridegroom coming in the morning light, we start celebrating the wedding and the moment of the **Eucharistic Liturgy**, or rather the “**Divine Liturgy**”, as Byzantine people call it. Whereas the Latin Church distinguishes the Holy Mass from the rest of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Byzantine Church prefers to celebrate the Eucharist in the morning, in order not to interrupt the theological logic that we have already evoked. Thus the Eucharist completes the night vigil and introduces every human activity, the work of man, sanctified by the Eucharist that he has just celebrated, transforms itself and becomes a liturgical action, not only a “human work”, but also “God’s work” (no longer “Opus humana” but “Opus Dei, no more « Ergon ton anthrōpon », but « Ergon tou Theou »).

The Byzantine Eucharistic Liturgy **begins with the blessing of the “Reign of God”**, that is to say our saved, redeemed and deified world. This blessing is given by the priest with the book of the Gospel and a sign of the cross on the altar. It ends with the same blessing. This indicates that the rite we are going to celebrate is the memorial of the entire work of IC XC, incarnation, public life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension to Heaven where He is sitting at the right of the Father, and His return. By this work, indeed, Christ has blessed the whole Creation again, after the Father’s blessing at the beginning of times, “and God saw that it was good” (God has spoken well of what He was creating, He blessed it). Then the cosmic devastation caused by man’s sin happened, as well as the disfigurement of the original beauty. In other words, by this gesture, we want to signify and make present the reconstitution of the Reign of God and the entire work of salvation.

Then several prayers lead us to “**the small door**”, when the priest – coming out of the left side door of the sanctuary, **brings the gospel in procession**, proclaims it in front of the faithful as the true Wisdom of God and entering by the central door (representing the wide open door of Paradise) puts it solemnly on the altar. By this rite, we become present to the mystery of the incarnation of the Word of God, who leaves Heaven (represented by the sanctuary, the space behind the iconostasis where the altar is), incarnates Himself and becomes a man among men in the womb of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. Thus the Word of God shows to the world and to mankind the true Wisdom of God and invites all men to follow him towards the celestial Kingdom of the Father, for He is God’s Son, admirable among the saints, the Arisen from the dead. He invites us to sit down at His right and share with Him all that is His, that is to say divinity. The priest turns his back to the faithful because he represents Christ turned towards the Father, the good shepherd whom all men must follow if they want to be redeemed by Him and led towards the blessed life.

At this moment, we read the kerugma of the apostles, a passage of the apostles’ texts, announcing to us the mystery of salvation. The Church – the Bride who pays attention to what the Bridegroom does for her and to which extent He has loved her – bursts out in the song of Halleluiah. Joyful and happy, it is standing near the empty sepulchre of its Lord (that is to say the reading desk) from where the angel of the resurrection (the deacon or – if he is absent – the priest himself) announces the Good News, the **Gospel** of Eternal life.

The Byzantine faithful listen to the gospel as if Christ Himself were speaking to them at this moment. They watch the book of the gospel as if it were the same person of Christ arisen. We are really taken and transported in front of the empty grave and the apparition of the Arisen, the Word become man, it really happens for us. The reading of the gospel ends with the blessing of the faithful. As they receive it from Christ’s hand itself, they exult and sing: “Glory to you, our God, Glory to you”, that is to say the proclamation of faith in the divinity of the Lord.

Then a **long litany** follows. It is a solemn prayer in which the Church presents to God its own needs and the song of the cherubim hymn (a hymn in which we are invited to be like the cherubims of heaven and to leave all our human preoccupations to welcome the one who is above all our preoccupations because He solves them by His sacrifice of love). Then the **great entrance** begins. The priest holds the chalice with wine and the paten with bread; once again he comes out from the left side door, mentioning the memory of all people he wishes, with the words of the good thief (Jesus, remember ... when you come into your kingdom). He enters through the central door, called the door of Paradise, and he puts the “Holy Offerings” on the altar. **By this rite, we become present to Jesus’ entering into Jerusalem in order to penetrate into the mysteries of Easter : Passion, Death and Resurrection.** Once more, Jesus comes to meet us and leads us after Him, like the good shepherd, into the mystery of His Passion of love, to be with Him crucified to evil and to arise with Him towards the Glory of the divinity of the Father.

Then prayers introduce us spiritually to the great mystery that is going to take place, according to the **proclamation of faith, the Creed, and the great Eucharistic Anaphora**, through which the Holy Spirit descends upon us and upon the offerings that are on the altar; by transforming these offerings into the body and blood of Christ, He also transforms us into members of Christ. This is the wedding between God and mankind and the whole creation. We really become the body of Christ, His Bride, the Church, sons of God by adoption; we rediscover the Light of the divinity and the divine Beauty. God’s work is being accomplished. What had started at Genesis is now reaching its plenitude.

It is the moment when the mystery of the Cross is being accomplished, the mystery of His burial and His resurrection, His ascension to the right of the Father, and we already experience all this with Him in the

sacramental mystery; transformed into the body of Christ, we arise; with Christ, we ascend to heaven and with Christ we are sitting at the Glory of the Father.

Transformed into sons of God thanks to the Holy Spirit and by the work accomplished by Our Lord, we may now call God our Father with authority. The community may now sing **Our Father** joyfully.

After a prayer called “the bowing of the head”, we proceed to the **rite of communion**. Now that we are the body of Christ, we nourish ourselves with Christ; He becomes once again flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones, blood of our blood, Life of our life. From this moment on, all that which we do, it is Christ who does it, our life is Christ’s life. It is the moment of our responsibility; the priest concludes the liturgy and invites us to live according to Christ in the world, to go on with His work. Our life is no longer, as I wrote previously, “human work” but the “work of God” (no longer “Opus humana” but, “Opus Dei”, no longer « Ergon to anthrōpon », but « Ergon tou Theou »).

Contrarily to the Latin rite which prefers to emphasize a devotional dimension and consequently allows celebrating the liturgy in any adapted context, from the church to the fields with flowers, the Byzantine rite maintains a cosmic language. So, if possible, it is preferable to celebrate the rite in a specific atmosphere, in a sacred space, symbol of the whole cosmos which is defined as microcosmos. The **Temple**, as a matter of fact, is constituted of **architectonic** and artistic **elements** that lead the faithful to the contemplation of the whole of creation and of the created world in which lights, colours, images and friezes place us in the whole spatial reality where the event of salvation that we celebrate is accomplished and becomes real.

The **sanctuary** behind the iconostasis, for instance, represents Paradise, the place where God is. **The doors of the iconostasis** are the doors of Paradise that Christ himself has opened; by going through them, He may go and recuperate the whole of creation. The **nave**, where the Bride is, the faithful and the saints on the icons and the frescoes, may be understood as leading again to salvation, to be married... Another characteristic is the decoration of the church, which does not have an esthetical function of embellishment but a theological role. We do not bring flowers to the church to embellish it (as a matter of fact, it already shines of the increated beauty of God who is beauty) but to make the creation and nature take part in this beauty. Flowers do not embellish the Church; on the contrary, it is the beauty of the Church, beauty received from God, that embellishes flowers and all that is brought to the Church and offered in front of the icons. In the liturgical rite, man brings this nature which, by its sin, has been raped from the divine beauty to the original beauty in the work of cosmic glorification accomplished by Christ.

Apart from the Eucharistic liturgy, we also celebrate the **hours**, during the day, that is to say prayers called after the hours at which they take place: **prime** just after the Liturgy or at dawn, **terce** at 9.00 a.m., **sext** at noon and none at 4.00 p.m. The evening prayer is called **Vespers** or “**Lucernaire**”.

It starts with the light of the day and ends in the darkness of the evening. In this prayer, we greet the light and we bless it. It starts with the commemoration of the whole creation. Through the psalm 103, the creation, born from the first gesture, God’s “fiat lux” and the realisation of all the rest, appears in this original light. The central moment of the prayer of Vespers is the **hymn “Fos llaron”** in which we commemorate our Lord’s passion and His descent to the underworld as a Trinitarian manifestation. During this prayer, the sun has already set and we light up the evening lights, lamps with which we start waiting for the Bridegroom in order to start again the liturgical cycle of the day. The “Fos llaron” is a very old prayer, of a very deep theological significance. The Vespers end with the evangelical song of “**Nunc dimittis**” with which we leave the light and we enter into the period of expectation.

The last prayer of the day is the “apodipnon”, the prayer after dinner, which would correspond to our Compline. This prayer has a penitential character. Before going to bed, the Byzantine faithful see the truth about themselves, about their condition as sinners and their need of being saved. They invoke the intercession of the Mother of God and of the saints to receive the Lord’s forgiveness and be readmitted, after their sleep, into the great vigil of dawn to take part, once again, in the wedding of the Eucharistic liturgy, that becomes thus the spiritual centre of the whole cycle of human life, the arrival point and starting point of every human day, which then becomes a holy day.