

The Byzantine Rite, the Church's Hidden Treasure

by Mr Louis Pizzuti, O.P.

I'm often amused by the lack of knowledge that most Catholics have regarding the catholicity of our Church. In 2005, when I began serving as English-language Cantor for a Ukrainian Catholic parish, people began asking if I was leaving the Catholic Church and if I'd have to miss Mass.

The fact is, while it's by the far the largest, the Church of Rome is just one of 22 *sui iuris* (self-governing) churches within the Catholic Church, all of which recognize the primacy of the Pope. Of the remaining 21, thirteen are of the Byzantine Rite, including the Ukrainian, Melkite, and Byzantine Catholic Churches. The other rites are the Alexandrian (Coptic and Ethiopian Catholic Churches), Antiochene (Maronite, Syrian, and Syro-Malankar Churches), Chaldean (Syro-Malabar and Chaldean Catholic Churches), and Armenian. All are equally Catholic, and the Divine Liturgy of each is a valid Mass.¹

The Byzantine Rite is the second most used rite — not only in the Catholic Church, but also in the world. It is the same rite used by the Orthodox Churches in the Greek tradition, viz. the Greek and Antiochian Orthodox Churches, and all of the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe. Its two principle liturgies are attributed to early Doctors of the Church, St Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom.

The Heavenly Liturgy



Iconostas from St John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church,
Syracuse, NY

The first thing a western Catholic notices upon entering a Byzantine church is that it's so different than the typical western parish. Icons, or stylized pictures of the saints, adorn the walls, and often, the ceiling; the altar itself is behind a wall covered with icons, the *iconostas*, depicting not only the saints, but also events in the life of Christ and His Mother. And when the Byzantine Mass, called *the Divine Liturgy*, begins, they find that almost everything is sung.

All of this is a reflection of the Byzantine understanding that our liturgy is an extension of the Heavenly Liturgy. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel."²

The icons serve a number of purposes. The first is a reminder of that indeed "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses"³. In every circumstance, but most especially when we have come to the Sacrifice of the Eucharist, we are in the midst of the saints who have gone before us, we are in the midst of the angels, and, of course, we are in the presence of Our Lord and His Mother.

In the same way, God commanded that angels be embroidered on the curtains in the Old Testament Tabernacle.⁴

The icons also are there to help us learn and remember our faith. A good example would be the icon of the Resurrection showing Our Lord standing atop a defeated Satan, while at the same time pulling up Adam and Eve from the grave.

But, icons serve a third purpose, and in the Byzantine understanding, it is perhaps the most important. Veneration of the icon is an act of Christian Worship. "Through the icon of Christ and his works of salvation, it is he whom we adore. Through sacred images of the holy Mother of God, of the angels and of the saints, we venerate the persons represented."⁵ "Similarly, the contemplation of sacred icons, united with meditation on the Word of God and the singing of liturgical hymns, enters into the harmony of the signs of celebration so that the mystery celebrated is imprinted in the heart's memory and is then expressed in the new life of the faithful."⁶ "As Basil, that much-versed expounder of divine things, says, the honor given to the image passes over to the prototype."⁷

The singing of the Liturgy is an ancient practice in both East and West. Think about the ending of the Preface in the Roman Rite: "And so we join the angels and saints in proclaiming your glory as we say: Holy . . ."⁸. At the same place in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the priest says, "Singing, crying, exclaiming, and saying the triumphal hymn, Holy. . .". Vespers and Matins (i.e., Evening and Morning Prayer) are also customarily sung. Indeed, there are special hymn-types found in these two offices which are never found in the Liturgy.

The History of Salvation

As beautiful as the iconography and chanting might be, they are surpassed by the mystery play which is the Divine Liturgy, in which Christ enters the world, Christ proclaims the Kingdom of God, and Christ is taken to be sacrificed.

The first portion of the Liturgy, the *Proskomedia*, takes place entirely behind the iconostas, in the Sanctuary, before the congregation even arrives. On a side table, called *The Table of Oblation*, the bread to be offered (leavened bread) is prepared for consecration. This represents Christ's virgin-birth and years of hidden preparation

In the next portion of the Liturgy, *the Liturgy of the Catechumens*, or, *the Liturgy of the Word*, at one point, there is a procession where the clergy exit from behind the iconostas through the door to the left of the altar and re-enter the Sanctuary through the doors in front of the altar, *the Royal Doors* (which had been opened at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word). During this procession, the deacon carries the Gospel. This procession, *the Little Entrance*, "typifies the entrance of our Lord upon his work of preaching to the world, and his drawing near to men."⁹

Just as in the Roman Rite, only a deacon, priest, or bishop may read the Gospel or deliver the homily. It is through the grace of ordination that such a man may sacramentally be Christ speaking to his people.

The last portion of the Liturgy, *the Liturgy of the Faithful*, witnesses a second procession, again following the same path. In this case, however, the clergy carry chalices with the Holy Gifts. This action, *the Great Entrance*, "typifies our Lord's going to His passion and death."¹⁰ The hymn typically sung by the congregation at this point says, "Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim and sing the Thrice-holy Hymn to the life-giving Trinity, now lay aside all cares of life, that we may receive the King of all, escorted invisibly by ranks of angels. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia".¹¹

The altar, *the Holy Table*, is behind the iconostas. This is reminiscent of the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple. There, the Holy of Holies was a place that only the High Priest could enter, where the people could not even look. Then, at the crucifixion, the veil was torn, top to bottom. The Holy of Holies could now be seen, but still, only a priest could enter. The opening of the Royal Doors to allow the Holy Table to be seen represents the tearing of that veil.

In the Communion Rite, the people approach the priest or deacon with their arms across their chest; there are no Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist. The Body and Blood of our Lord are mingled together in a chalice and administered with a spoon.

In Eastern Christian practice, Confirmation (or *Chrismation*) is never separated from Baptism; together, both are the Sacraments of Initiation. And, in Byzantine thought at least, one need not be able to understand that the Sacrament is Our Lord in order to receive; even an infant may receive, just as even an infant can have a relationship with Christ, albeit on an infant's level.

The Universality and Diversity of the Church

Jesus told us, "In my Father's house are many rooms".¹² And in His Body are many rites, each of which adds to the beautiful tapestry that God has woven since Pentecost. And each is necessary for the full functioning of the Body. "But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"¹³

How blessed are we to have this richness in the Body of Christ!

¹ In "faithful obedience to tradition, the sacred Council declares that Holy Mother Church holds all lawfully recognized rites to be of equal right and dignity, and that she wishes to preserve them in the future and to foster them in every way." **Sacrosanctum Concilium**, Vatican II Constitution on the Liturgy, 4. Cited by **Catechism of the Catholic Church**(CCC), 1203.

² Heb 12:22-24 (RSV)

³ Heb 12:1(RSV)

⁴ Ex. 26:1

⁵ CCC 1192

⁶ CCC 1162

⁷ St. John of Damascus, **An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith**, Book IV, Chapter 16. St Thomas Aquinas cites this passage in the **Summa Theologica**, Part III, Question 25, Article 3

⁸ Preface to Eucharistic Prayer II, Roman Missal

⁹ **Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church**, by Isabel Florence Hapgood. *Antiochian Christian Archdiocese*, 1983, pg 598.

¹⁰ *ibid*, pg. 599.

¹¹ English translation by the Synod of the Hierarchy of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

¹² John 14:2 (RSV)

¹³ I Cor 12:18-21