

UNIT 1B LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

15a: The Sanctification of Matter and Life

The Transformation of Humanity and the Cosmos as the context of Liturgy

Orthodox Christianity is deeply and strongly opposed to anything that might relegate the material world to second class status in terms of God's saving work. The inherent goodness of the cosmos in general and human nature in particular is the original blessing of God in creation, predicated on the conviction that God Himself considers all that He has made to be "good" (Genesis 1). This good creation contains within it creatures, humans, made in the divine image and with a likeness unto God (Genesis 1:26). No matter how much that likeness is defaced by sin, the divine image in humankind can never be fatally and utterly compromised. It is the *likeness* to the image that can be restored in Christ in so far as we choose to repent and acquire purity of body, mind and soul. St. John of Damascus makes this distinction between the image of God and His likeness in humans in these terms:

From the earth, God formed man's body and by His own in breathing gave him a rational and understanding soul, which last we say is the divine image-for the 'according to His image' means the *nous*¹ and free will, while the 'according to His likeness' means such likeness in virtue as is possible.²

Moreover, in that the Incarnation of the Word has actively taken up into union with the Logos our human nature, freely offered by the Theotokos, the cosmos itself will be liberated from corruption and death by the regeneration of humankind. Here is what St. Paul says concerning this:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:18-23)

¹ For an excellent exposition on the meaning of the "nous" (spiritual intellect) and the dangers of misunderstanding it, consult this article by Robin Phillips: <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/orthodoxyandheterodoxy/2023/05/19/how-nous-became-a-trojan-horse-for-secularism-and-why-it-is-so-difficult-to-translate/>.

² St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book 2 Ch. 12, here:- http://www.orthodox.net/fathers/exactii.html#BOOK_II_CHAPTER_XII.

Note that St. Paul eagerly awaits the redemption of the *body*, as does creation itself and there is a striking connection here between the salvation of humankind and the regeneration of the cosmos. In the Greek Fathers and especially St. Maximos the Confessor this link is established by the teaching, found also in pre-Christian Hermetic philosophy that humanity serves as a microcosm of creation.³ The destiny of humanity and creation are therefore inextricably intertwined. St. Maximus calls this transformative connection a “*physikos syndesmos*” or “natural bond.” This expresses St. Paul’s teaching that in Christ we have a New Adam in Whom both heaven and earth will be gathered together and regenerated into a unity in God:

... having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

Excursus – are humans utterly unique?

The special character of humanity as a microcosm of God’s creation and according to His own image and likeness does not necessarily require humans to be unique in this respect or isolated genetically in the evolution of primates in general and hominids in particular. This is just as well, for the possibility of life existing comparable in dignity and sanctity to our own elsewhere in the cosmos might well be proven at any time with the detection capabilities now at our disposal. Moreover, the dependence of all life, including our own, on precursors not too dissimilar from ourselves and, further back in time, common ancestors very different from ourselves is now well established. The special character of *homo sapiens*, unique perhaps on this world but not necessarily elsewhere, is not compromised by the possibility of humans not being unique in God’s plan for His creation. If this is the case then extra-terrestrial sentient life would also fall within the creative purpose of the triune God, perhaps also being called to a divine union with the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Alice Meynell’s poem: “Christ in the Universe”⁴ is an inspirational and theologically Orthodox reflection on this important issue.

The Mysteries of the Church and the Liturgical Arts

If this is God’s bearing upon the world in both the Creation of the Cosmos and the Incarnation of the Word, then the physical realm is as much an arena for holiness and blessedness as humanity itself. This respect, this veneration of the material world as a

³ St. Maximos the Confessor, edited and translated by Nicholas Constans, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Volume II* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press: Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 2014) Ch. 41.

⁴ <http://www.bartleby.com/236/265.html>

vehicle of God's Presence, and particularly after the Incarnation, has profoundly influenced Orthodox worship.

Authentic Christian worship is sacramental through and through. All the means of sanctification, making holy, that God has provided for us accommodate to the fact that He has created us not as disembodied spirits but as embodied souls. Over-spiritualised worship, stripped of this sacramental dimension, (worship we so often find in many of the heretical Protestant sects), deforms the human person by neglecting the fullness of our embodied existence. This is the sort of dualism that promotes a disembodied salvation, disconnected from both the messy realities of human life and the world of matter, a world which God regards as both good and holy. Authentic Christian worship therefore employs the good gifts of the natural world in order that the Holy Spirit might work, as He always does, through what can be touched, seen, heard, smelled and tasted.

Aside from the Mysteries of the Church, all of which have a physical component in their disclosure of God in His energising Presence, the visual media also have a place of prime importance. Classically and from the earliest period this has involved the use and veneration of the holy icons. Heretics have from time to time challenged their place in the life and worship of the Church and especially the iconoclasts in the 8th and 9th centuries. The Iconoclastic controversy lasted from 726, when Emperor Leo III (717-741) began an attack on the use of the holy icons until 843 when The Empress Theodora allowed their restoration. The two periods of Iconoclasm were separated by the reign of the iconodule (that is, icon-loving) Empress Irene, under whom the Second Council of Nicaea 787 was held. A number of defences of the holy Icons were made—some based on the existence of divinely approved images in nature and Scripture, others on the implications of the Incarnation, and yet more based on a prevailing metaphysic of images which connect to their prototype.

A foremost contributor to the debate at this time was St. John of Damascus, par excellence the Orthodox defender of the holy icons. St. John was able to write freely since he lived under Muslim rule outside the boundaries of the Byzantine emperor. One of his arguments concerned the holiness of matter to which we have already alluded in this lecture:

In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honour it, but not as God. How could God be born out of things which have no existence in themselves? God's body is God because it is joined to His person by a union which shall never pass away. The divine nature remains the same; the flesh created in time is

quicken by a reason-endowed soul. Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with His grace and power.⁵

The celebration of the restoration of the holy icons which is celebrated both on the First Sunday of Great Lent and in the October feast of the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council is not only a liturgical commemoration but also an affirmation that there is a sacred aspect of the physical realm as created by a loving God. Essentially the Fathers were articulating a full-bodied theology of creation at this Council and not only legitimising the liturgical arts that underpinned this. Orthodox Christians look upon matter as God's handiwork declaring it with Him as "good," a vehicle of His Presence and a testimony to His creative power and purpose in relating to something not-Himself in love, (for it is of the nature of love to relate creatively to an-other).

The Physical Aspects of Spiritual Worship and the Implications for Mission

The Orthodox Christian approach to the material world therefore is one of *veneration*. When, however, Orthodox Christians live within western post-Christian cultures they often encounter a very different approach to matter, or rather two approaches, both of them heretical. The first we might characterise as matter stripped of spirit. Here, the material world loses its contact with the divine. The material world may safely be plundered and human bodies effectively treated as so much "meat" or even genetically configured bio-machinery, to be tinkered with at will and simply justified by the need to alleviate suffering. The second heresy concerns the worship of the material world according to hedonistic impulses (at one end of the spectrum) or the religiosity (at the other end of the spectrum) of those pantheistic aspects of the New Age movement.

By contrast, Orthodox Christianity venerates the material world as God-bearing; first and foremost in the sacred Person of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God and by extension in all those disclosures of the divine energies manifest under physical form ranging from the Holy Mysteries celebrated in our churches to the poor whom the Church serves; from the lowliest speck of dust to the whole Cosmos itself. The God-bearing character of the physical has given shape both to the Church's anthropology which is theandric (God-united) and to the sacraments which are theophanic (God-showing-forth). It has ensured that both the Church's worship and theology has been preserved from the deformations of dualistic mentalism and Gnosticism both of which deprecate the physical and compromise the fullness of salvation. As St. Gregory the Theologian stated: "That which was not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved" (Letters 101.5). In the Incarnation, the fullness of our humanity is ingathered by God with nothing left out.

⁵ St. John of Damascus *On the Divine Images, First Apology no. 16* (Crestwood NY, SVS Press, 1980), pp 107.

At a practical level this is why Orthodox worship is inconceivable without kissing, prostrations, food, signing with the cross, water, oil, bread, wine, incense, icons and all those physical aspects of our embodied lives that God has provided for us as good and to be consecrated (set aside and blessed) for His service. Because of this, salvation is literally a “re-creation” in Orthodoxy and therefore necessarily inclusive, holistic, universal and imbued with a great hope.

Homiletics

15b: Preparation Principles

Let us pause for a prayer to empower each of us to study better:

Christ my Lord, the giver of light and wisdom, who opened the eyes of the blind man and transformed the fishermen into wise heralds and teachers of the gospel through the coming of the Holy Spirit, shine also in my mind the light of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Grant me discernment, understanding and wisdom in learning. Enable me to ... abound in every good work, for to you I give honour and glory. Amen.⁶

We each need to make the effort to learn and to expect to succeed.⁷ Eight guidelines apply: (1) Pray with fervour; (2) Seek help from the Church Fathers and the saints; (3) Stick to one idea; (4) Be open to inspiration in your preparation; (5) Be open to inspiration in your presentation; (6) Edit with fervour; (7) Take control of your material; and (8) Trust in the power of God as you teach and preach.

Embrace the Primacy of Prayer . . . to Grow in Our Understanding of God and of Ourselves

99% of a good homily or learning experience is in the preparation. If you fail to prepare properly, your congregation or class will be confused or bored or both. Prepare well, and your listeners will be inspired, even transformed in body, mind and spirit to serve God. There are three important preparation principles-pray, pray and pray. Even if your words are sometimes imprecise, your diction imperfect, if what you say is permeated by prayer, then those who have ears to hear will listen and grow in their understanding of God and their understanding of themselves.

For an Orthodox Christian in any kind of ministry, the essential sources must include the Holy Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church in the writings of her Fathers, Mothers and the great teachers of the faith, both the saints and the righteous alike down the ages until

⁶ From *Prayer Book in Accordance with the Tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, Revised Second Edition (Victoria, Canada: St Arseny Press, 2006), 44, “Prayer of a Student.” Available from: www.allsaintsofalaska.ca .

⁷ Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success: How We Can Learn to Fulfil Our Potential* (New York: Ballentine, 2006).

the present day. In addition to these primary sources, we should not be reluctant to add our own life experience and that of others insofar as these serve to illustrate and reinforce the primary spiritual principles that we are seeking to communicate. However, we should avoid an overreliance on funny stories and resist rambling and tangential references. If the adults or the children are not stirred by God through your words, then nothing has been achieved.

When tackling the Scriptures or the Tradition of the Church, we must set aside time to read in a leisurely but focused manner those texts that have a direct bearing on our teaching or preaching programme.⁸ Normal rules of exegesis apply. Do not string together disconnected and out of context texts and references. Prayerfully examine each source in its original context first; and then ask God to reveal to you the governing spiritual principle before you begin to try to apply that to a contemporary situation.

If you are having difficulty in understanding any given text, then get help either from a mentor, from a friend or from wide reading on your own initiative.⁹ Remember that people will assume that what you are saying on any given subject is probably more likely to be correct than their own surmising, unless of course they are specialists, in which case look out, as you may well be challenged during or after your presentation.

Seek Help from the Church Fathers . . . to Rejoice in the Company of the Saints

An important resource that is often overlooked is spending time with the Church Fathers, seeking their guidance on a specific issue. Augustine Cassidy has encouraged us with his own faith and insights: "We are not on our own," he writes, "We are part of a great company that draws on centuries of experience and, unworthy as we are, we enjoy the benevolent presence of the same God who has rejoiced in the company of the saints from the beginning."¹⁰ It is essential to recognise that "we are by no means separated from the ancient Fathers of the Church by a chasm that can only be bridged by a mystical leap of faith." However, as Cassidy notes:

Theology does not consist in a static body of propositions that attained perfection centuries ago as 'timeless insight into God,' one capable of reception by future Christians struggle-free. No insert edifice is available for pious (but mindless)

⁸ The books of Joanna Manley are very helpful, especially *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox: Daily Scripture Readings and Commentary for Orthodox Christians* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1990).

⁹ See especially Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013).

¹⁰ Augustine Cassidy, *Remember the Days of Old: Orthodox Thinking on the Patristic Heritage* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), pp. 61, 63.

transferral, preserved without effort against the ravages of time. Engaging in theology is a strenuous task for us today just as it was for the Fathers of long ago.¹¹

Just as later Church Fathers reflected on the writings of the earlier Church Fathers and sought to apply their vision to later times, we too have a similar responsibility to consider how the message of all the Church Fathers in their own cultures applies to our culture.

Even with a balanced understanding of how the faith and insights of the Church Fathers might be communicated to each of us and to our culture today, we are still confronted with a major problem in communication: "How can the vast legacy of Orthodox Christianity be rendered manageable [to us today]?"¹² One possible response is through the symbols of Christian faith. Such a perspective is grounded in the wish not so much to go "back to the Fathers," but rather "to move forward with the Fathers."¹³ Precisely how to apply the lessons of a monastic culture to today is a challenge that confronts every preacher and teacher who seeks to communicate the insights of the Church Fathers in a sermon or a lesson.

Stick to One Idea . . . for Example, Humility

Choose one, yes, one and only one key thought, idea or aspect. The practical application of this principle in relation to Biblical exegesis will be dealt with in the next lecture, but here is its significance at the preparation stage.

When our Lord taught in parables, there was always one key point. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan the key point is a question asked by the lawyer: "who is my neighbour?" All the other details of the story have their relative significances, but these are subordinate to the main theme. The main theme is like a King being dressed by his courtiers. Each courtier brings an item of fine clothing to the King for his dressing. By the end of this procedure, the King will be attired with many fine and attractive garments, but the whole point and primary objective of the dressing is to robe the King himself, exemplifying his dignity, beauty and power.

In your teaching and preaching don't become side-tracked into examining each and every garment-its stitching, design, colour and texture or even the background of its manufacture. These details, if elevated to primary importance in your sermon or talk, will only serve to distract and confuse your hearers drawing them away from your main point. Your key idea must be king of your presentation; and all of your listeners should be clear that the clothing is only present to dress that key idea with purpose and existential importance for each

¹¹ Cassidy, p. 64.

¹² Cassidy, p. 105.

¹³ Cassidy, Chapter 4, "Forward with the Fathers," pp. 141-191.

listener. Consider, for example, the focus on humility of the seventh century monk St. Isaac of Syria (also known as St. Isaac of Nineveh). As A. M. Allchin has pointed out, for St. Isaac:

Humility is much more than a moral quality. It is the essential characteristic of God himself as he wills to become incarnate for the salvation of the world. God himself is infinitely humble in his dealings with creation. When his creatures become humble, then they become truly like him. They become transparent. All his glory shines through them, and all things come together in peace around them.¹⁴

Allchin has taken this key idea of humility from St. Isaac of Syria and brought it alive theologically and practically for us today in our lives and in our culture. At the same time, we are reminded of the transparency in the face of Moses as "the skin of his face shone because of [God's] speaking with him" (Exodus 34:30).

St. Isaac himself linked personal humility to peace within a person. St. Isaac wrote:

No one has understanding if he is not humble, and he who lacks humility is devoid of understanding. No one is humble if he is not at peace, and he who is not at peace is not humble. And no one is at peace without rejoicing. In all the paths on which people journey in this world they will find no peace until they draw near to the hope which is in God. The heart finds no peace from toil and from stumbling-blocks until it is brought close to hope-which makes it peaceful and pours joy into it. This is what the venerable and holy lips of Our Lord said: 'Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' (Matthew 11:28) Draw near, he says, to hope in me; desist from the many ways [that weary you] and you will rest from labour and fear.¹⁵

Confronted with such a powerful call to come into the presence of Jesus Christ, one can understand why Moses "put a veil over his face" except when he "went in before the Lord to speak to him" (Exodus 34.33-34).

Be Open to Inspiration in Your Preparation

Within this focus on prayer, the insights of the Church Fathers and the importance of a key idea, you can still be open to inspiration from the Holy Spirit as you prepare your presentation. Your goal is set out clearly in the Septuagint translation of Psalm 1:3: "Be like the tree that was planted by the channels of waters, which will yield it fruits in its season." In essence then, it is essential to meditate and to consider the many different "channels of

¹⁴ A. M. Allchin, "Introduction," *Daily Readings with St. Isaac of Syria* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), p. 17. Translated by Sebastian Brock.

¹⁵ *Daily Readings with St. Isaac of Syria*, "Humility and Peace," p. 65.

waters"—themes of purpose—that might be pursued and how those various themes might fit together into a presentation that speaks to your listeners and readers.

This is not an easy task. A theme that is suitable for one occasion, is often not suitable for another occasion. If you start well, but then hesitate and are unsure how to proceed, it is often helpful to read over what you have written and let your previous insights give you "a running jump" as to the next step that should be taken. It is also helpful both to you and to your audience to indicate whether a particular idea is a suggestion from you or a moral imperative from the Lord. St. Paul makes this distinction very clear in 1 Corinthians 7:10, 12, when he indicates the difference between when "I give instructions, not I, but the Lord," as opposed to when "I [Paul] say, not the Lord." Many preachers and teachers blur this distinction, leaving their listeners puzzling over how much authority a particular sermon or teaching should have in the lives of their listeners.

Be Open to Inspiration in Your Presentation

The preparation of a sermon or lesson does not end when you rise up to speak, because the Holy Spirit might also rise up within you, offering new insights and new challenges. Furthermore, those who listen to your sermons or participate in your lessons may grab your attention with their frowns or yawns, encouraging you to change your initial plan. Even if on occasion you prefer to speak in an extempore fashion, it is still appropriate to write down the content first. By all means, sit easily with the text if you prefer a more informal kind of communication, but always have the text in front of you, as a reminder and a safety net. Even when you are following a written text closely, a new phrase or insight can inject freshness and spontaneity into the communication of your key idea.

Edit with Fervour!

Revision is essential, until you are really satisfied that you have expressed your idea clearly and that the final product is what the Lord wishes to be taught or proclaimed. When editing you should remember that you will be speaking this text and therefore the words chosen must be those that you would ordinarily speak and not write. As to the revision of content, this process should be followed, usually in the same order:

1. Ruthlessly cut ramblings, waffle and tangents.
2. Surgically remove unnecessary elaborations and subsidiary points. Keep in mind the main point.
3. Try and go deeper into the point you are considering—deeper rather than wider. Your hearers should hear something they have not heard before, ideally anyway.
4. Do not recycle old ideas and presentations. Edit, edit, edit! Be firm and brutal in your use of the delete key.

Take Control of Your Material

Ken Untener describes the last preparation principle as vital and often neglected. I agree. It's called: Taking Control of Your Material. We have taken control of our material when, to quote Untener, we are: "fully at home with it so that we can speak personally and with a certain amount of freedom."¹⁶ This means that whereas you might prefer ordinarily to deliver the talk verbatim, sometimes you will be able to deliver the talk from the heart and with reference only to say six main headings (the number will vary depending on the length of the talk). To be able to do this, you must be fully in charge of your material, so immersed in it and in prayer that you really can speak accurately and in a disciplined manner without having your eyes glued to the text.

Orators of old, who could often speak for hours on end without notes and in this disciplined manner, acquired this skill through the use of visual associations, easily remembered. If and when you have mastered this technique you won't even need headings because these will already be tagged in your mind with visual cues. For example, if you are giving a talk on the missionary journeys of St Paul, you might remember to cover that section dealing with his stay in Ephesus by visualising a picture of the surviving facade of the city library with a number painted on the front corresponding to the order of that section in the narrative. This, however, is an advanced skill and most people prefer to use headings once they have mastered their material.

Conclusion: Trust in the Power of God to Teach and to Preach

The ultimate impact of any teaching or preaching task begins with setting a good foundation to accomplish a specific on-going task. As with any other walk of life or skill, care in preparation is a key to success, but please remember that when all other human gifts falter and fail it is God who can make good His Word, as the words of St Paul make clear:-

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

For those who listen to good sermons, there are significant dangers:

¹⁶ Ken Untener, *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists* (Paulist Press, 1999), p. 59.

To expose yourself to the razor-like quality of the Word of God, which 'is sharper than a two-edged sword' (Hebrews 4:12), is likely to have drastic consequences. People who have listened [attentively] to sermons have finished up leaving their old life behind, yielding their possessions, abandoning their careers and more besides-so listeners beware!¹⁷

Preachers and teachers must also be aware of their responsibility to listen carefully to the Word of God and only preach and teach at all times as they are directed by the Lord.

Let us conclude with an appropriate prayer after our time of studying together:

We thank you, Lord our God, that again on this occasion you have opened our eyes to the light of your wisdom. You have gladdened our hearts with the knowledge of truth. We entreat you, Lord, help us always to do your will. Bless our souls and our bodies, our words and our deeds. Enable us to grow in grace, virtue and good habits that Your name may be glorified, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now, and forever. Amen.¹⁸

¹⁷ Richard Littledale, *Preacher's A-Z* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2008), p. 22,

¹⁸ From *Prayer Book in Accordance with the Tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, Revised Second Edition (Victoria, Canada: St Arseny Press, 2006), p. 45, "Prayer of a Student." Available from: www.allsaintsofalaska.ca .