

Connecting Liturgy and Spirituality: Notes from Eastern Christian Experience¹

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Introduction

What is the connection between liturgy and spirituality? The first section of this essay considers two temptations that we might run into by posing the question in this way. The second section takes a descriptive approach and looks at how a number of individuals today experience this connection (or its lack) in Eastern Christianity. As my title indicates, this is not an exhaustive empirical study but is more of a snapshot in time of several people whose reflections and experiences are revealing and helpful in coming to an initial understanding of how Eastern Christians understand or fail to understand the connection between liturgy and spirituality.

I. Liturgy versus Spirituality?

There are two immediate methodological temptations. One is to pit liturgy and spirituality against each other in a dualistic framework that falls into the familiar trap of thinking that

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“liturgy” is outward ritual and “spirituality” pertains only to one’s inner life. Although there is an “essential duality in Christian existence,” as Georges Florovsky says,² since personal faith and corporate existence are both essential, a key insight of Eastern Christianity is that liturgy can be spiritual and that the inner life has its own “liturgical” rhythm and purpose. The ascetic life is just as liturgical as it is spiritual. It is a different sort of “training” (*askesis*) that is linked to the ecclesial calendar of feasts, fasts and set prayers that the entire community is praying in their daily prayers. Daily life in this Orthodox *ordo* – how we relate to each other, nature, food, time – is meant to be an extension of the sacramental life.

The un-spontaneous “rule of prayer” is at the heart of Orthodox discipline that governs both liturgy and spirituality. It governs the wisdom of a liturgy that is prescribed and relatively unchanging. This order and stability allows us to “enter” the liturgy without the pressure of making up something new every time. The very predictability of Orthodox liturgy, when it becomes familiar to participants, gives them permission to rest in its structure and allows God to act. Indeed, this is characteristic of traditional liturgy everywhere, as Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) observed a few years ago:

Unspontaneity is of their essence. In these rites I discover that something is approaching me here that I did not produce myself, that I am entering into something greater than myself, which ultimately derives from divine revelation. This is why the Christian East calls the liturgy the “Divine Liturgy,” expressing thereby the liturgy’s independence from human control.³

² Georges Florovsky, “The Worshipping Church,” in Kallistos Ware and Mother Mary, *The Festal Menaion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 21. Florovsky’s article is a superb introduction to how liturgy and spirituality function together in the Orthodox tradition.

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 164–5.

II. Liturgy and Spirituality as Disincarnate and Timeless Metaphors?

Ratzinger was careful to insist that the sense of “entering something greater than myself” must be rooted in revelation if it is to be Christian liturgy and Christian spirituality properly so called. The second methodological temptation is therefore to reduce both liturgy and spirituality to an experience of metaphors and symbols that empty them of their incarnate, historical, and objective realities based in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, this is a potential hazard of over-emphasizing the heavenly, “not of this world,” timeless, transcendent, mystical aspects of liturgy and spirituality, all of which are often seen as trademarks of Eastern Christianity that have proven attractive to many, including those who have difficulty with the foolish particularity of faith in the incarnate God.

A sense of mystery and timelessness is not unique, of course, to the Orthodox experience of worship. Ritual studies have long recognized this as a key feature of religion. Richely Crapo’s recent textbook on the *Anthropology of Religion* notes that “The enactment of religious beliefs in ritual imbues those beliefs with a sense of timelessness and sacredness.”⁴ This sense of timelessness brings the worshipper into “liminal space,” a concept especially appealing to contemporary spiritualities, as in this example from Constance S. Rodriguez writing in *The Meta Arts: the Magazine for the Metaphysical, Spiritual and Healing Communities*:

I have always had a fascination with doors and doorways. They represent portals that can open the way to richness and meaning in one’s life. Thresholds hold a mystery; a mystery that lives in a neither/nor place... When we move into a threshold place, we leave Chro-

⁴ Summary of Chapter 7 at http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072387238/student_view0/chapter7/chapter_summary.html.