

Towards a Renewed Mystagogy of Orthodox Christian Worship

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Abstract

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It is axiomatic in Orthodox liturgical theology that the central act of worship, the Divine Liturgy, is a participation here and now in the kingdom of God. This should naturally result in the shaping of Orthodox worshippers to live in this age according to the heaven-on-earth reality of the age to come, to live the “liturgy after the liturgy” in a life of kingdom-building, yet there is little to suggest this is happening in Orthodox churches today. In “Towards a Renewed Mystagogy,” Orthodox priest Geoffrey Ready draws on insights from post-critical theory to lay the groundwork of a contemporary liturgical mystagogy focused on an enacted and embodied narrative designed to strengthen participation and Christian formation, shaping believers for a life of real participation in the kingdom of God.



Introduction – Caught Between a Traditional Mystagogy and a Postmodern World: Celebrating the Orthodox Divine Liturgy Today

The Orthodox Christian theology of ministry, professedly grounded in the apostolic and patristic tradition of the early church, asserts that ministry, or service (*diakonia*), is a function of the intended purpose (*telos*) of our existence. That purpose is our participation in the kingdom of God, our “union

and communion with the life of God in Trinity.”¹ As suggested by many liturgical theologians, Orthodox Christian worship is thus eschatological, concretely symbolising here and now our participation in the life of the age to come. Opposing pseudo-Christian philosophies that divide an eternal heaven from a temporal earth and describe salvation as an escape from our own space and time to eternal life, Orthodox Christianity proclaims the New Testament understanding of heaven and earth – God’s realm and the world of his creation – being fundamentally intertwined now and for ever united in Christ (*cf.* Ephesians 1:10). Early Christians followed Jewish tradition in asserting that the real division is not between earth and heaven, but rather between this present age – full of misery, strife, suffering, and death – and the age to come, when on the “day of the Lord” God would decisively act according to his promise to put all to rights, to turn misery to joy and death to life, and to gather his people under his sovereign power and protection. For the apostles and other witnesses to the life, voluntary death and glorious resurrection of Jesus, that day has been inaugurated, and the age to come, as yet not fully revealed, has been made mysteriously accessible to those who follow in the pattern of Jesus, gather in his name to worship God, and manifest the church, the new humanity. This worship effectively *takes place in the kingdom*, on the last day, when heaven and earth are already united, because the church is precisely “the eschatological manifestation of the kingdom of God” called to “manifest this identity in the world.”² In worship, all baptised believers, clergy and lay alike, are revealed as co-members and *co-ministers* of the new kingdom.

This our tradition teaches us. Yet this Orthodox Christian eschatological and liturgical theology of ministry finds less sure ground in application. It has provided fertile soil for the *ressourcement* of much recent western Christian reflection on

¹ John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 39.

² Dimitrios Passakos, “Worship, Rituals and Liturgy in Orthodox Tradition: Insights from Practice and Theology,” in *Worship Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 2004), 26.

ministry, not least the *missio dei* theology of church mission,³ but practical guidance from Orthodox authors is difficult to find or discern. Like most of my fellow presbyters within the Orthodox Church, I find myself caught between the beautiful theological vision expressed by the Divine Liturgy – the belief that our worship actualises heaven on earth – and the reality of our parishes in which people are no longer formed in any meaningful way by that worship experience. Anyone scrutini-
singing the Orthodox Church today would be hard-pressed to see the manifestation of the kingdom of God beyond the hallowed, icon-bedecked walls of the church and the ancient chants rising up within them. If heaven and earth are now joined in Christ, and every celebration of the Divine Liturgy is a fore-
taste of the fulfilment of the day of the Lord – the experience now of the coming and future kingdom – then why are not more Orthodox Christians encouraged and equipped to be kingdom-builders? Where are the hallmarks of self-sacrificial and loving kingdom-living that should characterise all those who are by God’s grace made to be participants of his un-
created life?

The sad truth is that most Orthodox Christians have largely forgotten what New Testament scholar N.T. Wright calls the “devastating and challenging”⁴ message of the advent of the kingdom of God and inauguration here and now of the age to come. As Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas asserts in many of his works, the Divine Liturgy has lost its power to shock, to announce the dethroning and reversal of the world’s powers, the victory of God in Jesus, and the kingdom of God already present now in the fullness of the power of self-sacrificing love. Although it is “glaringly obvious” that the Orthodox Di-
vine Liturgy is an image of the kingdom of God, Zizioulas laments the disappearance of the kingdom of God in Orthodox Christian consciousness “under the weight of other kinds of questions and other forms of piety,” a loss which has had “very grave consequences for the way the Liturgy is celebrated, the

³ David Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 114–115.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2012), 37.