

The Liturgical Year and Mystagogy:  
Entering into the Paschal Mystery  
Presentation to the Meeting of  
the Bishops of the Catholic Eastern  
Rite Churches in Europe  
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Daniel Galadza

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*1. Introduction*

Most Reverend Bishops!

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today and to present to you several thoughts on questions related to mystagogy, the liturgical year, and liturgical theology. It seems to me that these are things we often talk about and believe are important, but that there is a rift between our theory and our practice. This is ironic, since a mystagogy of the liturgical year can be found in no place other than the celebration of the liturgical services themselves, particularly in the scriptural lessons that we read, the prayers that we say, and the hymnography that we sing throughout the year. It is through these scriptural readings, prayers, and hymns – not simply as texts for study or personal contemplation, but as integral elements of our common liturgical worship – that we are “lead into the mystery” that we celebrate over the course of the liturgical year. In order to develop this idea, it is first necessary to say a few words about mystagogy as a literary genre, hymnography’s exegetical character, and the nature of the liturgical year, before coming

to several specific examples that may be helpful for improving celebration of the liturgy today.

During the course of this discussion of the liturgical year, I hope that you keep in mind a few quotations from recent magisterial documents of the Catholic Church. First, the statement that the liturgy is both “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and at the same time “the font from which all her power flows” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [= SC] 10)<sup>1</sup> paints the picture of a constant journey, from summit to source, and vice versa. This journey is one we undertake together as the Church in the earthly liturgy, in which we obtain “a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims....” (SC 8). Whether through the sacramental life of each individual member of the Church or the common celebration of the life of Christ and his saints in the cycles of the week and the year, we are together on a common journey of all Christians towards the kingdom of heaven to be partakers of the divine nature. Being members of the Eastern Catholic Churches today, however, we are also called to preserve our “liturgical rite” and “established way of life,” and to take steps to return to our “ancestral traditions” (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* [= OE] 6).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “... Liturgia est culmen ad quod actio Ecclesiae tendit et simul fons unde omnis eius virtus emanat...” *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §10. The English translation quoted in this paper is from “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy – *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” The Holy See, originally promulgated December 4, 1963, accessed November 22, 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

<sup>2</sup> For English translation, see “Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite – *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*,” The Holy See, originally promulgated November 21, 1964, accessed November 23, 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_orientalium-ecclesiarum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_orientalium-ecclesiarum_en.html); see also George Gallaro, “Rome’s Liturgical Instruction for the Eastern Catholic Churches,” *Logos: A Journal for Eastern Christian Studies* 43–45 (2002–2004): 149–179; and Peter Galadza, “Sacrosanctum Concilium and Byzantine Catholic Worship and Chant,” in *TOEOTHE: Studies for Stefano Parenti*, ed. Daniel Galadza, Nina Glibetić, and Gabriel Radle, *Ἀνάλεκτα Κρηπτοφέρρης* 9 (Grottaferrata: Monastero Esarchico, 2010), 139–154.

While I am overjoyed that a gathering of Eastern Catholic bishops manifests the true universality of the Catholic Church through the presence of hierarchs from many *sui juris* Churches, including bishops from various Greco-Catholic Churches, as well as Maronite, Chaldean, and Armenian bishops, and even representatives of the *sui juris* Roman Catholic Church, it is impossible to delve deeper into specific aspects of each individual liturgical tradition. For this reason, my specific examples will come from my own Byzantine liturgical tradition, but I hope that representatives of other Eastern liturgical traditions can provide similar parallels and examples from their own Churches.

## 2. *Mystagogy*

The word “Mystagogy” (μυσταγωγία) can have two meanings: it can refer either to the celebration of the sacraments (μυστήρια) or to an explanation of the sacraments. Through the word’s literal meaning, “leading into a mystery,” it has come to be used to define a literary genre known also as “liturgical commentary.”<sup>3</sup> Amid the waves of new conversions, after Christianity had become the officially recognized religion of the Roman Empire, many Church Fathers from the fourth to eighth centuries wrote such commentaries to explain the mysteries of baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist to the faithful who had recently been initiated into the Christian Faith. As Theodore of Mopsuestia writes, “every sacrament consists in the representation of unseen and unspeakable things through signs and emblems. Such things require explanation and interpretation, for the sake of the person who draws nigh unto the

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<sup>3</sup> René Bornert, OSB, *Les commentaires byzantins de la Divine Liturgie du VII<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Archives de l’Orient Chrétien 9 (Paris: Institut français d’études byzantines, 1966); see also Robert F. Taft, SJ, “The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34–35 (1980–1981): 45–75; Taft, “Commentaries,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A.P. Kazhdan et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1:488–489.

sacrament, so that he might know its power.”<sup>4</sup> In order to explain the liturgical rites to the faithful, the Church Fathers adopted exegetical methods used for interpreting the scriptures. Thus, a literal and a spiritual meaning could be found in the text, with the spiritual meaning being further divided into: the dogmatic (or allegorical) level, which interpreted the Old Testament as it referred to Christ; the moral (or tropological) level, relating the allegorical sense to our Christian life; and the eschatological (or anagogical) level, referring to the future kingdom and our present contemplation of it.<sup>5</sup> Such approaches to explaining the liturgy were further divided between the well-known dichotomy of Alexandrian spiritualizing tendencies and Antiochene literal or historicizing approaches. Thus, the Alexandrian style of mystagogy attributed to St. Dionysius the Areopagite in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* reminds the faithful initiated into the mysteries of the unity of heaven and earth through symbols, which are not arbitrary but have a purpose, namely to lift us up to God.<sup>6</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor’s *Mystagogy* follows the tropological approach and is just as much about moral and ethical life reflecting God as it is about liturgy.<sup>7</sup> Antiochene-style authors, such as St. Germanus of Constantinople, applied multiple layers of meaning to liturgical rites, explaining them through the earthly life of Jesus Christ, as well as through the heavenly liturgy.

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<sup>4</sup> *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord’s Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, ed. and trans. A. Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies 6 (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Limited, 1933), 17.

<sup>5</sup> See the introduction to St. Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, ed. and trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 23–25.

<sup>6</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 1.I.1–2, PG 3:369–373B; English translation in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (London: Paulist Press, 1987), 195–197.

<sup>7</sup> *Maximi Confessoris Mystagogia una cum Latina interpretatione Anastasii Bibliothecarii*, ed. Christian Boudignon, CCSG 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); English translation in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold, intro. Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 181–225.

### 3. *Hymnography*

It is noteworthy that in Jerusalem after the fourth century, no further explanatory texts or commentaries on the Divine Liturgy and the rites of initiation were written. Instead, the clergy and monks of Jerusalem chose another literary genre to explain the liturgy and mysteries to the faithful, namely that of hymnography.<sup>8</sup> Hymnography had the advantage of being part of the structure of the liturgical services themselves and explained to the faithful what was happening *during* the services, rather than as an explanation before or after the celebration of the mysteries. In this way, hymnography has an exegetical function, providing a commentary on scripture and the mystery of salvation in Christ. St. Maximus the Confessor adds to hymnography's exegetical character by emphasizing its moral qualities: "the spiritual enjoyment of the divine hymns signified the vivid delights of the divine blessings by moving souls toward the clear and blessed love of God by arousing them further to the hatred of sin."<sup>9</sup>

A perfect example of hymnography's function in explaining the liturgical rites themselves can be found in the cherubic hymn sung at the great entrance during the Divine Liturgy:

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.

Rather than applying meaning to the great entrance by explaining it as a burial procession of Christ to the tomb, symbolized by the altar, Fr. Robert Taft analyses the meaning of the cheru-

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<sup>8</sup> See Helmut Leeb, *Die Gesänge im Gemeindegottesdienst von Jerusalem (vom 5. bis 8. Jahrhundert)*, Wiener Beiträge zur Theologie 28 (Vienna: Herder, 1970); and Daniel Galadza, *Liturgy and Byzantinization in Jerusalem*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), especially 214–217.

<sup>9</sup> Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia*, 11; here translated in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, Berthold, 199.