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The Cosmos (the World) as Church in the Making

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Abstract

Through man, the whole world is called to sanctification by way of grace, sanctification which is shared by the Church through her grace filled work of the Holy Mysteries and hierurgies. Therefore, one cannot demonstrate a complete cosmic vision of Orthodoxy without exploring the beacons of Orthodox worship. This worship takes place in the Church and mobilizes the whole creation and human life, from birth to death, in solidarity towards salvation and transfiguration with the whole visible and invisible order.

Keywords

Church, Orthodoxy, Holy Mysteries, hierurgies, grace filled work, uncreated grace, transfiguration, deification.

In Christianity, the central point of the relationship between God and the cosmos is the reality of creation, which is a truth received through revelation, appropriated through faith and underlined by the rationality of things in the world, a rationality perceived by humans. In this context, the existence of the world is a gift sprung from the love and goodness of God, bearing the deep aspiration for its Creator, as a permanent development of existence, because this existence is supported by Him, as the source and giver of life.

The cosmic vision of Orthodoxy, based on the reality of creation, bears the seal of human solidarity with the entire universe, in man's process of salvation and deification. In this solidarity, man is not to be confused with the cosmic creation, just as the cosmic creation is not to be confused with God, but each bears their distinction as separate existence. *The existence of God is an absolute experience, infinite, and independent*, whereas *the world enjoys a participated existence*¹, that is an existence gained over time, unmistakable and unamalgamated. Therefore, the orthodox vision of the cosmos in communion with man and God has no pantheist substrate.

The complete purpose of creation, as a gift, was fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world, Who raises man to communion with God, leading him, at the same time, *to understand and use the world, as gift or as a sacramental means of His love and life*². Through Christ, the creation is placed in the order of the uncreated grace, that is, the whole world becomes a receptacle of divine grace, which flows over all creatures, through the Church, and each creature receives it to the extent to which it is endowed, by the reality of creation and of the fulfillment of the synergy with its Creator.

In other words, the whole world is sensitive and, at the same time, capable of sanctification through grace, sanctification which is shared by the Church through her grace filled work of the Holy Mysteries and hierurgies. In consequence, one cannot present a complete cosmic vision of Orthodoxy without exploring the beacons of Orthodox worship.

This worship takes place in the Church and mobilizes the whole of creation and the human life, from birth to death, in solidarity towards salvation and transfiguration with the whole visible and invisible order.

St. Maximus the Confessor speaks of Holy Church as a type and icon of God, in the sense that, just as God, bringing everything to existence, keeps all the things in an unmingled union, so the Holy Church of God binds the faithful together in a divine unity, shape and denomination, through the grace and the unique call of faith³.

¹ Horia Nițulescu, *Sentimentul cosmic în spiritualitatea ortodoxă*, in "Gândirea" 3/1-2 (1994), p. 74.

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Creația ca dar și Tainele Bisericii*, in "Ortodoxia" 28/1 (1976), p. 15.

³ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Mistagogia*, partea I, trad. de Protopop Stavrofor Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in "Revista Teologică" 34/3-4 (1994), p. 170-171.

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At the same time, the Church is also a type of the cosmos, of the intelligible and the sensible one, having the *Hieraticon*, that is *the Holy Altar*, as a symbol of the intelligible cosmos, and the *nave* as a symbol of the sensible cosmos⁴. But *the Holy Church of God is an icon not only of the sensible world in itself... It has the divine Hieraticon as heaven, and the beauty of the nave as the earth*⁵. The Church is, again, an image of man, imitating the soul through the *Hieraticon*, and depicting the body through the *nave*. It is, however, both type and image of the soul, looked upon through itself, as one that manifests the glory of the theoretical part through the *Hieraticon*, and having the jewel of the practical sacrifice in the *nave*⁶.

This is the orthodox vision of cosmic space, as a possible prospective Church; that is, it shows the fulfillment which the cosmic creation must accomplish through man until the end of time, but until then, the meeting place, as a participation of those which are to come, of the seen and the unseen cosmos with the prayers of man is the Holy Altar. Here, the age to come is already given, it is among us, for man exercises his highest mission, the sacramental priesthood through which he consecrates the entire creation, calling it to sanctity, in communion with him, during the *Divine Liturgy*. Al. Schmemmann says that the Bread and Wine designated to be the Sacrifice of Christ, during the *Divine Eucharist*, include within themselves all our sacrifices, our own being that we offer to God, as well as the whole creation, yet in the new image⁷. *Therefore, the Divine Liturgy is the ascent of creation to its perfection and to the glorification of the Trinity through the Sacrifice of the Son of God, made man, and through communion with it. The descent of the Son of God through His Incarnation as a man... and through His eternal giving of Himself to the Father together with us, is the requisite factor for the creature to be perfected and for God to be glorified by it. The Sacrifice unites heaven and earth forever*⁸.

Consequently, the Church appears as a cosmic mystery, which embraces entirely God's world, the world from the beginning and the world from the end of ages. The threefold prefiguration of the Church, as

⁴ *Ibid.*, partea a II-a, in "Revista Teologică" 34/7-8 (1994), p. 349.

⁵ *Ibid.*, partea I, p. 174.

⁶ *Ibid.*, partea a II-a, p. 349.

⁷ Al. Schmemmann, *Euharistia*, trad. de Pr. Boris Răduleanu, București, 1994³, p. 114.

⁸ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă*, Craiova, 1986, p. 299.

a church sanctuary, a cosmic creation and man, forms the great and one Church of Jesus Christ, the triumphant Church in which the cosmic Liturgy is performed, at the same time as the Liturgy is performed in the actual church sanctuary. That is why the cosmic creation, the world, in its visible side, is called upon to assimilate its explicit nature as Church, only as far as the militant Church, or the communion of the faithful, is concerned. This communion of love is visible in worship. *Love is her heart, and the heart of Orthodoxy*, as Sergei Bulgakov says, *is found in Orthodox worship*⁹.

Therefore, the concrete expression of the communion of love in Orthodoxy is the liturgical solidarity, expressed in worship. During worship, man expresses his prayer to God, and brings the offerings of created nature in order to acquire blessing, so that, through the ways of expression of worship, the entire human life is sanctified. As a consequence, *through the inclination of man to prayer we see the whole nature kneeling*¹⁰.

The Church is a reflection of divine beauty, and this reflection is mingled in the material forms of worship. Images and material symbols are a prefiguration of the beauty and harmony which will encompass the whole creation in the age to come. At the same time, the worship is the expression of our microcosmic condition, because in the cultic act, through bowing and prostrations, the body becomes the friend of the soul in adoration, because it is *the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6: 19)*. Through the participation of the human body to all the aspects of the worship, the whole creation becomes involved, as something which is contained in man. In the richness of the Orthodox liturgical worship, each sacred object has its symbolism and precise purpose in the body of the whole, according to its latreutic dispensation. All categories of life and existence participate in the liturgical life. In this sense, the matter, carrying a symbolic divine revelation, somewhat spiritualized, participates in its own way to the worship of God. Thus, we can say that the Orthodox worship reunites the beauty of the unseen world with the beauty of the material world¹¹.

In the Orthodox worship, life is elevated from the level of normal existence to the experience of God, even while on earth, for it is inspired by the uncreated and mysterious energies of the Holy Spirit, through the Holy Mysteries and hierurgies. Through these, potentially, the sanctification

⁹ Horia Nițulescu, *quoted work*, p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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of human nature and the world is offered, and here commences the transfiguration which will occur after the Resurrection, as a preparation of *the new heaven and earth*. In all the Holy Mysteries, the matter is sanctified by invoking the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the Holy Mystery of Baptism, water is sanctified and acquires, in this way, new charismata: *Therefore, O King who lovest mankind, do Thou Thyself be present now as then through the descent of Thy Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water... And confer upon it the grace of redemption... a gift of sanctification, a remission of sins, a protection against disease...*¹². The body of the baptized person becomes a member of the Body of Christ, which is the Church, and the man in his/her psycho-physical constitution, is blessed to fulfill holiness through the faith in Christ: *O Lord, our God, Who through the fulfillment of the baptismal font hast by Thy goodness, sanctified them that believe in Thee, bless this child here present, and may Thy blessing come down upon his/her head...*¹³.

Though the Holy Mystery of Unction, God pours healing over man, of both the body and the soul: *Holy Father, physician of souls and bodies..., heal also Thy servants from the weakness of body and soul which holds them fast and give them life through the grace of Thy Son*¹⁴.

The sanctification of the cosmos and the world through the grace filled ministry of the Holy Mysteries becomes evident in the most redemptive way in the *Divine Eucharist*, which is the fiery kernel of Orthodox worship. Within it, through the grace filled sanctification of the Bread and Wine that become the Holy Body and Holy Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ, the entire cosmos is transfigured, sanctified and deified, as elements brought forth represent the offering of the entire cosmos. The matter sanctified through the Eucharist shows its future state, and the Eucharistic moment is the beginning and the guarantee of this state. At the same time, the *Divine Eucharist* is the beginning of the deification of matter, due to the fact that we participate in the divine nature of the deified Body of Christ, and the deification of our body means that it becomes immortal. The effects of the partaking of the Holy Communion are cosmic, for *we perform a sacrifice for the well being of the earth, of the sea and of the entire universe*, says St.

¹² *Molitfelnic (Euchologion)*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 1992, p. 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131-132.

John Chrysostom¹⁵. If sin entered the world through man, it is through his prayers that the entire world is sanctified, as a cosmic solidarity is realized in the Eucharistic moment through prayer. The way of this solidarity is shown *in the golden book of Orthodox life, which is the essence of a millenary life, worn under the flame of the Spirit – the Euchologion*¹⁶. In this book of worship, the entire human life, from early childhood until death, and after that, is carried towards the haven of victory. All ages of man, his thoughts and aspirations, his desires and his work, are sanctified and placed on the path of his spiritual ascent towards acquiring the likeness with God, Who is glorified in the Trinity. Therefore, the cosmos, in its entirety, i.e. the land, the sea, the sky, in other words the whole visible side of the world, participates in sanctification and deification. For example, at the *Service of The Great Blessing of the Water*, at the Baptism of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, the whole seen and unseen sides of the cosmos are present. The fruits of the earth are also sanctified before being given to man. At the ritual that is accomplished in times of drought, everything that has breath forms a whole, in and through prayer. Therefore, it is safe to say that the grace filled work invoked by the priest for man and the whole world, through the prayers and hierurgies contained in the *Euchologion*, best express the *cosmos as Church in the making*.

In Orthodoxy, all the moments that mark the fulfillment of the process of salvation occur openly in the Church. The Annunciation, the Nativity, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, are always present in the lives of Church members, whether they realize it or not. The ritual acts, expressed by words and chanted in the choir, perpetually update these events. In these chants, the whole cosmos or just a part of it is symbolized as having life in itself through human life and through the work of the uncreated divine grace, bearing the impressions of thinking, of the rationality of things, of liveliness and dynamism.

The cosmos participates in the man's experiences, in his joys and sorrows. It shows sadness at the Crucifixion of the Savior: *When the creation beheld Thee hanging in Golgotha, Who have hung the whole earth freely upon the waters, it was seized with amazement, and it cried: "There is none holy save Thee, O Lord!"*¹⁷ Joy fills it at His Resurrection:

¹⁵ Horia Nițulescu, *quoted work*, p. 80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Cântarea a III-a, Canonul Sâmbetei celei Mari* (Ode III, The Canon of Holy Saturday), in *Triod (Triodion)*, București, 1970⁷, p. 656.

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*Let the heavens, as is fitting, rejoice, and let the earth be glad. Let the whole world, both seen and unseen, keep the feast: for Christ has risen, our eternal joy*¹⁸. The liveliness of nature is due to its close connection to the personal human life. The chants express, on the one hand, man's inner state, and on the other hand, they are creations that sprung from a direct supernatural revelation. In the holy history of salvation, we know from the lives of hymnographers that, as a result of visions of angels or even of the Most Holy Theotokos, they were inspired to chant. Therefore, the hymnographers were practicing Christians, or, as St. Evagrius puts it, they were proper theologians, much like the iconographers, who, wanting to portray the transfigured matter in their icons, before starting to work, had to spend time fasting and praying, in order to be penetrated themselves by this transfiguration.

Thus, in the Orthodox worship, cosmic life is shown to be sympathetic with man *in the whole dramatic history of man's salvation, which is brought to tears by sin and transfigured by the joy of salvation*¹⁹.

The Crucifixion and death of our Savior Jesus Christ are the great *cosmic mourning*. In this state, the entire universe is encompassed by pain, embracing the pain of Christ the Savior on the Holy Cross. A cosmic cataclysm occurs: the earth shakes, the sky darkens, the sun hides its face, and everything that has breath is crucified with Christ. The reading of the *Oikos* from the service of *Matins* of the Holy Passions expresses, to those who pay heed, the suffering of the whole creation: *He who holds all things together has been lifted up upon the Cross, and all of creation weeps at seeing Him hanging, naked, upon the wood. The sun hid its rays and the stars cast aside their splendor. The earth shook with great fear, the sea fled, and the rocks were split asunder. Many tombs were opened, and the bodies of holy men arose. Hell groaned below and the Jews considered how to slander the Resurrection of Christ, but the women cried: "This is the most blessed Sabbath on which Christ has fallen asleep to rise on the third day"*²⁰.

¹⁸ *Cântarea I, Canonul Învierii din noaptea Sfințelor Paști (Ode 1, The Canon of the Resurrection on the Night of Holy Pascha)*, in *Penticostar (Pentecostarion)*, București, 1973⁶, p. 16.

¹⁹ Horia Nițulescu, *quoted work*, p. 82.

²⁰ *Icosul, Canonul Sfințelor Patimi din Sâmbăta cea Mare (The Oikos, The Canon of the Holy Passions from the Great and Holy Saturday)*, in *Triod...*, p. 658.

Therefore, the Resurrection is the feast of cosmic joy, for grace is poured over the entire universe, preparing it for the great transfiguration and the beauty of deification: *Now all are filled with light, both heaven and earth, and those beneath. So let every creature celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, in whom it was strengthened*²¹. The colours of Orthodox icons show the entire creation in the perspective of its future renewal. Icons adorn the Church, and the liturgical hymns fill it with glory, because the sanctuary of the church symbolizes *the cosmos transfigured as accomplished Church*.

²¹ *Cântarea a III-a, Canonul Învierii din Sfânta și Marea Duminică a Paștilor (Ode III, The Canon of the Resurrection from the Holy and Great Sunday of Pascha), in Pentecostar..., p. 17.*