

Bethlehem All Over Again

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(From a homily given on Nativity Eve, 2023)

Eucharist as Incarnation

Intermittently throughout the year, and always during the festal days of Holy Nativity, Father Roman would say, “Every Divine Liturgy is Bethlehem all over again.” With his customary child-like enthusiasm, he would proclaim these words with the joy expressed by the angelic host announcing the Good News to the shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, to men good will” (Lk 2:14). “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (Lk 2:11-12).

Prior to the Divine Liturgy, before you arrive, the priest performs a short service in a small room on the north side of the Sanctuary where he prepares the bread, called “the lamb,” that will be used in the upcoming Divine Liturgy. In our temple, there is in this room an icon of the infant Christ, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying on the discos, indicating that the lamb that will be placed on the discos in the service of preparation will become the incarnate Christ of Bethlehem. Toward the end of this preparatory service, the priest places a cross-shaped support for the covering of the lamb on to the discos and says, “a star came and stood over the place where the young child was,” again associating these actions with the incarnation of Bethlehem. And often, as in our St. Andrew Chapel, this association is made even more explicit by having the icon of the Nativity painted above the table on which this service is performed. These liturgical threads weave together the experiential theology that Fr. Roman proclaimed with the words, “Every Divine Liturgy is Bethlehem all over again.” The radiant and transformative beauty of the incarnation expressed in the feast of the Nativity was, for Fr. Roman, manifest in every Divine Liturgy—Emmanuel, God coming to be with us.

The reality of the *incarnate* Christ with us in each of our parishes around the world at every Divine Liturgy is expressed when we echo the words of our Lord at the first mystical supper: “This is my body”; “This is my blood of the new covenant” (Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk

22:19-20). The sobering, and even disturbing, implications of these proclamations are expressed by Jesus himself: “I am the bread of life. ... If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; *and the bread that I shall give is My flesh*, which I shall give for the life of the world” (Jn 6:48, 51). These outlandish-sounding words were perplexing to his listeners for they “quarreled among themselves, saying, *“How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?”*” (Jn 6:48-52). Jesus responds to their uncertainty and confusion by being all the more emphatic:

Most assuredly, I say to you, *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life*, and I will raise him up at the last day. *For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.* (Jn 6:53-57; emphasis added)

With these teachings, Jesus anticipates the Mystical Supper at which he will institute our Eucharistic celebrations by commanding his disciples, “Take eat, this is my body” and “Drink of it all of you, this is my blood.” Apparently most of Jesus’ followers found this literalism too extreme to embrace for we are told that, “From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more” (Jn 6:66). But that Jesus means these words literally is emphasized by how he responds to the departure of many of his followers. He does not say, “Sorry, you are misunderstanding me; I’m speaking figuratively.” Rather, he lets them leave without a word of compromise and instead turns to his hand-picked twelve disciples and says, “Do you also want to go away?” (Jn 6:67). Jesus presents his disciples with a crisis, a Y in the road. Are you going to follow me to the point of eating my flesh and drinking my blood, or are you going to look for a more comforting teaching elsewhere?

This is the crisis that he sets before all of us every Divine Liturgy: Are we willing, “in the fear of God and with faith and love,” to “draw near” to the incarnate Christ, to feed on him and live eternally? Or do we prefer to keep distant from such unsettling encounters?

Personal Transformation in the Eucharist

Sometimes Father Roman would follow his proclamation that the Divine Liturgy was Bethlehem all over again with words like “The Son of God once again takes on our humanity so that we might take on his divinity.” The reality of bread and wine becoming the body and blood of our Lord is essential to our becoming transformed into his likeness. Our becoming holy—our *theosis*, in technical terms—depends on consuming divinity.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, one of St. John’s disciples, explains in his letter to the Smyrneans (*circa* AD 114) that the rejection of the incarnate nature of the Eucharist, both in teaching and in action, becomes the path of self-destruction:

Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God. . . . They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because *they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.*” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2;7:1; emphasis added)

St. Ignatius is teaching us not only that the Church understands Jesus’ eucharistic words literally, but also that—just as Jesus taught—we are perishing by refusing to partake of his body and blood, that we are refusing the very gift of God that is given to us for our personal transformation into his likeness. We have no life in us unless we consume him who is Life.

The transformative power of the incarnate Christ of holy communion is emphasized all the more in the second century by Justin Martyr, an apologist for the faith:

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, *so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.* (*First Apology*, 66; emphasis added)

The very same flesh and blood of the incarnation is the flesh and blood we consume in holy communion for our salvation, for the transformative nourishment of our flesh and blood. We become Christlike by, as St. Peter puts it, “becoming a partaker of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4), fulfilled by consuming the incarnate flesh and blood of the Son of God. We become what we eat.

Cosmic Transformation in the Eucharist

Father Roman emphasized not only the personal transformative power of the Eucharist for each of us individually, but also its cosmic dimension. Sometimes he would follow his proclamation that the Divine Liturgy was Bethlehem all over again with words like these: “The Son of God takes on the materiality of this world so that all creation can be restored to its created beauty.” Or he would speak of the atoms throughout the universe being transformed by the Eucharistic celebration. The Eucharist is not just *for me*, but for all creation: “On behalf of all [things] and for all [things]” (*kata panta kai dia panta*).

The personal and the cosmic dimensions of the Eucharist are intimately related, as St. Paul teaches in his letter to the Romans.

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 labors with birth pangs together until now.* Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (Rom 8:18-23; emphasis added)

The imagery is vivid: fallen creation is *groaning and laboring*, images of the birthing process, and in this state it is eagerly waiting with a focused anticipation *to be delivered*, another image of the birthing process. To be delivered *from* what? From the bondage of death and decay which

controls this world. And to be delivered *to* what? To glorious liberty! The created realm longs to manifest its intrinsic freedom, a glory that is to be *revealed in us*. And how is creation going to be transformed in this way? When we, as humans, are revealed to it as who we truly are—sons of God with redeemed bodies. In this way, *our current sufferings*, which are the occasion of our own *groaning within ourselves*, are all channeled toward the end of a transformed and restored creation.

Fallen creation, then, depends for its deliverance from corruption *on the transformation of our bodies*, which—as we saw above—are transformed by consuming Christ himself. Cosmic transformation involves the personal transformation which comes through participation in the Holy Eucharist. Divine Liturgy, as the continuous fulfillment of Bethlehem, unceasingly offers Christ to us *for the life of the [entire] world and its salvation*.