

The Holy Eucharist Today: Pastoral-Spiritual Prolegomena

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Abstract:

This study includes testimonies concerning the Holy Eucharist by three great Fathers of Romanian Orthodoxy: Fr. Cleopa Ilie, Fr. Prof. Constantin Galeriu and Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae. All three of them are recognized as being highly proficient in Church teaching, devoutly Orthodox and, consecrated preachers and catechists. This is why I consider that their contribution to the understanding and valorisation of the many aspects related to the Holy Eucharist is essential.

Keywords: *Eucharist; Holy Fathers; pastoral care; spiritual life*

Introduction

As it is known, the Holy Eucharist was not instituted as a privilege for Priests, but as a non-bloody sacrifice and fruit of the Divine Love to all those who want to unite with Christ the Lord.

In Orthodox Theology, those aspects of the Sacrament of the Eucharist that are perhaps the most interesting are addressed: the dogmatic, liturgical, moral aspects etc. However it seems that the practical aspects are the most neglected but they are the most necessary, because they have special relevance to the individual life, whether theologians or the laity. We all know, for instance that we should commune, that there are certain conditions by and through which we should do that: that it is recommended that we fast and that fasting should be complete etc. In addressing these aspects, Christians deal with these things on a rationalistic plane, to wit, on a social-pietistic plane, which are not at all in compliance with Orthodoxy.

I particularly researched the texts of three great Fathers of Romanian Orthodoxy: Fr. Cleopa, Fr. Prof. Galeriu, and Fr. Prof. Stăniloae. The first is recognized as the Romanians' Confessor par excellence. Father Prof. Galeriu is recognized as a consecrated preacher and catechist and he, in some sense, serves as a bridge between Fr. Cleopa

and Fr. Stăniloae. The latter is claimed in turn by dogmatists, patrologists, etc. to be a theologian encompassing a wide spectrum in his works. Nevertheless, it is very appropriate to claim the great professor for the practical pastoral field, granting him due praise and admitting that what characterized his very first writings was a strong accent on spirituality, without falling into Pietism, and an emphasis on the scientific aspect, without falling into mannerism or Scholasticism.

Fr. Cleopa Ilie

I consider it opportune to start my study by referring to the one considered to be the greatest contemporary Romanian Confessor: Fr. Cleopa Ilie from Sihăstria. When he was asked about the Holy Eucharist, he answered as theologically as possible: Eucharist can be understood only from a Christological point of view! Here is the exact quote:

The Eucharist is the Body of Christ, Christ Himself, the whole Christ. Therefore, the Eucharist must not be seen as a means of Grace, of an abstract Grace independent from Christology, but as Christ Himself, Who redeems the world and man and conciliates us with God through the Holy Sacraments (Cleopa 2004: 34).

In the Eucharist, prayer, faith, hope, beneficence, and ultimately everything believers do in private apart from it, stop being private activities and become corporate activities, *i.e.*, man's entire private relationship with God becomes the relationship of God with His corporate people, with His Church. The Eucharist is not only the Communion of each of us with Christ separately, but more specifically the Communion of believers with each other: "not many bodies, but one body" (Cleopa 2004: 37). Then he affirms: "The Holy Eucharist is very useful to man, if he truly communes with faith, with love and with the Confessor's absolution. Because he who approaches unworthily takes damnation, as it is fire burning the unworthy" (Cleopa 2004: 38). It is obvious that what was important to him were concrete aspects, such as the ones mentioned in the preamble. He also said:

Those who lead a clean and pure life, those who know their conscience is clean, those who do not have canonical impediments and are absolved by their Confessor can commune, and those who have not confessed their sins and their Confessor has not absolved them and they have not fulfilled their penance cannot even approach the Eucharist. Because even if they commune only once a year,

they are like Judas who communed once and Satan possessed him and he betrayed the Lord (Cleopa 2004: 40).

To Fr. Cleopa, the solution to the delicate “problem” of the often or rare communion came from ascertaining the believer’s state. This approach is the only correct one. Communion is: “good”, “sacred” and a “frightening Sacrament,” and further, he offers us a true five-item program in which he shows us how we can commune with Christ:

1. The first and most important Communion is with the physical Body and Blood of the Lord (Cleopa 2004: 41).
2. The second way of Communion is spiritual communion, specifically through prayer. Practically, it must be understood that any Christian can come to Church and even if they are not allowed by the Priest to commune because they have sins that take time and work to fully absolve, they can still commune with Christ through prayer. If you come to the Church and say the prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.” With all your heart, you commune as many times as you sigh for the name of Jesus just like those who take the Holy Sacrament (Cleopa 2004: 43).
3. The third way of communing is by keeping Christ’s Commandments. This is why, when we fulfil them, we commune with Christ: “This is the third way to commune. And you can commune like this many times a day, as many times as you obey Christ’s Commandments... even if not allowed to commune by a Priest” (Cleopa 2004: 45).
4. The fourth communion is by hearing. How? For instance, I am not allowed by the Priest to commune for several years, regardless if I am a man or a woman. But I go to Church and I devoutly listen to the Holy Liturgy, the apostles’ writings, the Gospel, the Cherubikon, the Axion Estin and the Priest’s sermon. If someone listens devoutly to the Word of God, they receive a spiritual meaning and they commune with Christ (Cleopa 2004: 46).
5. The fifth way of communing is through the Antidoron that is cut for us during the Holy Liturgy. This is why we cannot pray in this service for drunkards, those who swear, unwedded

partners, sectarians, or those who committed suicide. These small parts of the Prospora or “Antidoron” are consecrated during the Epiclesis, but they do not become Christ’s Body, and at the end of the Mass they are all put in the Chalice and this way all believers are united with the living Christ’s Body and Blood.

We must mention that these last four are ways of communion through the work of good deeds, but that they *do not replace* the first one (Irineu Slătineanul 2001: 49).

We can conclude with the fact that Fr. Cleopa emphasizes the practice of Church and the numerous methods of becoming more spiritually-minded available to man. He is not a theoretician or an analyst like Fr. Prof. Constantin Galeriu, for example. We will see that in a much more nuanced manner, he addresses another type of audience and brings to the fore other aspects of the Eucharist.

Fr. Prof. Constantin Galeriu

The great Confessor from St. Silvestre’s Church in Bucharest, Fr. Prof. Constantin Galeriu begins by answering the question: What is the Eucharist? He says:

There are many of those who hear this word and fail to understand it, as it is a theological word, not a common word. Eucharist means gratitude. Surely, when we say Holy Eucharist, we actually mean “Holy Gratitude.” Most of them never hear it, others hear it and forget it, others hear it and fail to understand it. Nevertheless, theologians know that the Holy Eucharist is what believers generally understand by the Holy Communion (Galeriu 1991: 63).

Being much more dedicated to the Scripture, he approaches in detail the accounts of the Last Supper from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The author shows that Christ the Lord took the bread in His hands, blessed it, broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying: “Take it and eat, for this is My Body, given for the life of the world”, and then “Drink from it all of you, for this is My Blood...”. The words are not just part of the Orthodox ritual of the Holy Liturgy, but they represent in each service a repetition of the Last Supper, so that all those who believe may commune with Christ. The main argument is presented by the fact that in that time God did not give regular bread, He gave Eucharistic bread,

namely His Own Body in the image of bread. In the instance of the cup (“Drink from it all of you ...”), He did not offer just wine, but His own Blood or wine turned into His Blood. This is why, now, through the Liturgy, the Sacrifice from that time is continued in a non-bloody manner, and believers can participate in faith and by accepting the teachings of the Church. What is put forward in the Proskomedia, namely the Proskophora specially prepared and the wine mixed with water specially prepared, are turned into Christ’s Body and Blood, or in the Holy Eucharist, when the Priest invokes God’s Holy Spirit. The miracle consists of the fact that now, after centuries, believers can commune with the Same Christ as then (Galeriu 1991: 63).

An interesting observation on the theology of Fr. Galeriu is the one regarding the unity between the Saviour’s Body and Blood and the direct reference to the Last Supper. The Maundy Thursday, as well as on Golgotha, Christ did nothing else but show that That was Himself, complete, and that the sacrificed Body and the shed Blood are together. Through these observations, Fr. Galeriu does not back off from the “classical” approach of the Eucharist. Another beautiful idea is the one related to the Priest’s and believers’ prayer, as the Liturgy and Sacrifice are not performed only by Priests or only by believers, but the Priests and believers do it together:

I pray for the Holy Eucharist and you pay attention to this. The priest says: “Let us pray to the Lord.” Meaning all believers. And it is not only the Holy Liturgy that is not performed only by Priests but by Priests and believers, but all the services of the Orthodox Church. Each serves as they can: Bishops as Bishops, Deacons as Deacons, and believers as believers. Everyone must participate in the holy services being aware that they perform them as well, and that by doing their portion, the purpose of the Holy Liturgy is fulfilled, namely reaching the moment of the Holy Eucharist, for communion (Galeriu 1991: 67).

Therefore, it is good to know and not forget that we do not receive the Saviour’s Body and Blood separately from the Soul and Divinity of the Saviour. When we commune with our Lord Jesus Christ, we do not actually commune with the Body and Blood separately, but with the Body and Blood of the Resurrected Christ, meaning with His whole divinity and humanness and that we are equally responsible for the state in which we receive Christ.

Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae

As regards the barycentre of this study – the approach of Eucharist according to Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae – we notice that he wrote in a deeply dogmatic but spiritual manner.

The Professor Priest founded his theological interpretations on the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition as was most authentically possible. This is why he took the Apostle Paul's texts such as:

We were therefore buried with Him through Baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life; For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His" (Rom. 6:4-5);

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body... because we know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to Himself (2 Cor. 4:10-14).

To the great theologian, the Holy Eucharist is the mystery of the fullest presence and of the most efficient work of Jesus Christ in the Church and, through it, in the world. Speaking about the consecration or transformation of the Sacrament, the author mentioned here makes a true confession of faith (Stăniloae 1969: 75), deepening the Eucharistic theology by showing it as the face of the future life. Through the Eucharist we are communicated the body of Christ Himself, with His state and power, as He Who endured death and is transfigured by Resurrection (Stăniloae 1970: 64). The Eucharist is truly the queen of all Sacraments, the spring of all sacraments. Without losing our individual personalities, the Eucharist unites us with Christ, meaning that His Blood, which flowed out of His Body on the Cross in order to generate in this Body death and the spiritual state of the Resurrection, passes onto us, intending to generate in us the same death and resurrection (Stăniloae 1970: 65).

The Eucharist engrains in us the power to surrender completely our existence to God, in order to receive it back fully in eternal life, like Christ, through resurrection. The Eucharist is not so much for our renewed life on earth, like Christ's life on earth, but especially for eternal life (Stăniloae 2009: 70).

The Eucharist is the force of a magnetic agent working in our earthly life drawing us to itself; it is the polar star guiding the ship of our

life on the waves of earthly existence; it is the fermentation or the dough that turns our life gradually into the eternal life. The new life from Baptism, which follows the death of the old man, cannot exist without the perspective and earnest of eternal life, supported by the Eucharist. This is why the Eucharist is given immediately after Baptism and after Chrismation (Stăniloae 2009: 71).

Thus, the Eucharist gives us not only the power of defeating sin and giving ourselves to God, but also of receiving real death when it comes, as Christ received it, as a gift from the Father, without fear or doubt related to our eternal life. It gives us the power of dying when we must, not only resembling Christ's death, but also effectively, just like Him, having inside us the working earnest for eternal life to which we pass. United with Christ in the Eucharist, we fear death no longer, as we bear inside us the Body of the Resurrected Christ like a cure or antidote of immortality or eternal purification, as the Holy Fathers call the Eucharist (Stăniloae 2003: 87). When you approach the Eucharist, it is important to believe Christ's Body and Blood are present in it and that you are a sinner, as well as to have fought in any way against sin and for your redemption (Stăniloae 2003: 88).

Conclusions

It is only appropriate to emphasize in the end a few ideas that unite and also differentiate the three authors mentioned. First, it is obvious that all three maintain the Orthodox viewpoint: the Holy Eucharist is divine food in the guise of bread and wine (transfigured through consecration by the Holy Spirit), it is consumed by believers of all times, from the beginning of Christianity until today, who receive holiness and unite themselves with the whole and actual Christ in every Communion. Also, all three refer expressly to believers; communing with Him means covering yourself with His power. Communion with His body, as a communication of His power to us, as a communication of His Spirit in our soul and will, must not be a magical reception of Him as if working Himself without us. This is why special preparation is necessary to this purpose. Third, as another common line, it is noticeable that both as a cult act and as a divine-human act or as a work of transformation of the bread and wine into Christ's Body and Blood, the Holy Eucharist reconstitutes

and updates now what He did for the people's redemption: Birth, Life, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension. The Holy Eucharist introduces us in today's Church, in which eternity enters time and works as a continuous present.

Regarding the differences between the three, one example would be that Fr. Cleopa emphasizes the aspects of the believer's preparation to receive the Eucharist. This is why he mentions many different sins, Confession Guides and other things. His writings focus also on temptation, on the devil's traps. In exchange, Fr. Stăniloae seems to emphasize more the fact that man today lives in a society almost taken to the limit through all the modern distractions, which is why he considers that it is absolutely necessary to go back to the Fathers. He addresses especially future and current Priests, and his words tend to be pedagogical. He does not neglect the aspects related to preparation and purification through Confession, the aspects related to spiritual growth, prayer and continuous orientation toward the mind to God. As if uniting the first two, Fr. Galeriu appears voluble. He does not create arguments related to the Sacrament of the Eucharist and does not change the classical orientation of the Fathers of our Church, but he has a warmer tone.

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