

COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW

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- *Art and Coptic Icons: Twelve Years Later*
- *The Real Presence of the Lord*
- *The Teachings of Abba Philemon*



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ART AND COPTIC ICONS: TWELVE YEARS LATER

John Watson

After more than two decades of contributions to the Coptic Church Review, it now seems important to recall the examination of ‘*transfigured matter*’ in the Summer issue of this journal in 1992.¹ Iconography, with a contemporary Christian appreciation of the relationship between Art and Theology may, for many, occupy a central place in modern Coptic and recent ecumenical thought.

A number of significant volumes were reviewed in the CCR Vol. 13 No. 12,² but in the past decade many more related publications have received careful attention throughout the Christian world. Not all of these contemporary works were specifically theological or Christian, but both iconography and modern art deserve more than a little scrutiny because both have an authentic place in devotion and general religious thought. The brief phrase ‘Transfigured Matter’, which became the title of the CCR piece in 1992, has a certain force when we think of Christian and especially Orthodox icons, but, in the survey that follows, these two words should also be understood as significant not only for Iconography but also for the personal psychology of the *iconophile*, *iconodule*³ or anyone who looks at any art anywhere.

In recent years there has been a considerable demand for icon prints, and for books about icons and their meaning. Perhaps one of the most accessible texts is that by Jim Forest, a convert to the Russian Orthodox Church, who is able to illustrate, mainly through a series of careful meditative reflections on classical icons, the importance of the eye and the heart in the mutual movement between icon and viewer. Forest’s book is packed with pertinent comment: “The icon shows the

¹ Coptic Church Review. Volume 13. Number 2, *Transfigured Matter: A Theology of Icons*, John Watson, Summer 1992.

² *Icons*, Ed. Gennadios Limouris, WCC, Geneva 1990: *Voicing Creations Praise*, Jeremy Begbie, Edinburgh, 1991: *Imago Dei*, Jaroslav Pelikan, Princeton, USA, 1990: *Towards Contemporary Coptic Art*, Jacqueline Ascott, Cairo, 1988: *Coptic Iconography*, Stephan René, London 1990.

³ The term ‘iconophile’, translated as ‘lover of icons’ is used by Michel Quenot *The Resurrection and the Icon*, SVS Press, NY, 1997 though ‘iconodule’ is more familiar and can be translated as ‘icon worshipper’ though ‘worshipper with icons’ might be preferred. (See. John Baggley, *Doors of Perception*, Mowbray, Oxford 1987. pp.19, 21.).

recovery of wholeness. Over centuries of development, iconographers gradually developed a way of communicating physical reality illuminated by the hidden spiritual life.⁴ A slightly more contentious text is *The Resurrection and the Icon* by Michel Quenot, suggesting that the icon is losing its uniqueness because of a proliferation of modernist images, a dependence upon commercially produced religious imagery, and a general sense that the modern world has become increasingly reliant upon false images.⁵ Quenot affirms the essential alienation of Orthodoxy from modern thought. Whilst sensing the psychological poverty of much art, he suggests that the icon speaks to the depths of personal being: through Orthodox tradition, icons remain central elements in Christian practice with the surviving intention of fostering faith. *The Educating Icon* by Anton C. Vrame is another careful investigation of the power of Orthodox visual culture upon the lives of individuals, as much as upon the life and tradition of the Church. Vrame speaks not only of the importance of icons in the educative processes of Orthodoxy but more affectingly of the fact that it is he who has been taught by the icons. In his last chapter, entitled *The Sacrament of Education*, the author places Orthodox Christian imagery at the centre of his thesis: "When we feel that our educational efforts are frustrating or frustrated, we can look to the icon as a visual standard bearer. Recall that the concept of *theosis* (deification) was not a logical doctrine, but a vision of life. The icon bears witness to the ideal that education should strive to attain... the icon provides hope in the possibility of the vision."⁶ Each of these Eastern Orthodox texts deserves attention.

The Coptic Orthodox and other Middle Eastern churches are similarly blessed with publications comparable to those of Forest, Quenot and Vrame. Ashraf and Bernadette Sadek, the editors of *Le Monde Copte* have done more than anyone to enlarge our understanding of Coptic iconography in their *L'Incarnation de la Lumière: le renouveau iconographique copte à travers l'oeuvre d'Isaac Fanous*.⁷ This important work not only affirms the centrality of Isaac Fanous in Coptic culture but also outlines the history and practice of Coptic art as he has affirmed it.⁸ *The Incarnation of Light* verifies the mystical, ascetic and communal traditions of the Copts and is the most important work of Coptic culture to have been published in the last half century.⁹

⁴ *Praying with Icons*, Jim Forest, Orbis Books NY, 1997.

⁵ *The Resurrection and the Icon*, Michel Quenot, SVS Press, NY, 1997.

⁶ *The Educating Icon. Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way*. Anton C. Vrame, Holy Cross, Boston Mass. USA, 1999.

⁷ *L'Incarnation de la Lumière: le renouveau iconographique copte à travers l'oeuvre d'Isaac Fanous*. Ashraf et Bernadette Sadek. Le Monde Copte, Limoges.

⁸ Coptic Church Review Vol.22 No.3. Fall 2001. pp. 94-5).

⁹ *The Light of Christ*, John Watson, *Watani* 10, June 2001. Review: p.11 *Art and Christian Enquiry Bulletin*, John Watson, London, July 2001.

*L'Art Copte en Égypte: 2000 ans de christianisme*¹⁰ is the catalogue of the exhibitions opened in Paris from 15 May to 3 September 2000 and at Cap d'Agde in Southern France from 30 September 2000 to 7 January 2001. It contains a brief but important essay *Témoignage d'un Peintre Égyptien à Propos des Icônes* by Isaac Fanous, where he offers his testimony concerning the relationship between the images and the Egyptian character: we may assume that he means the Egyptian Christian character.¹¹ The entire catalogue emphasises the perception that Coptic Orthodox Christianity was cradled in the culture of pharaonic Egypt, that Egypt became a major colony of the Roman Empire before the time of Christ and that there was a Greek inheritance in the intervening period, emphasising a debt to three cultures. Other noteworthy material about Coptic Art can be usually read at the *Institut du Monde Arabe* in Paris.¹² A further significant text concerning Christian iconography in the Middle East is *Icônes Arabes, art chrétien du Levant*¹³. Contributors to this volume include Samir Khalil SJ, who is well known as a visiting lecturer at the Coptic Institute in Abassiya, and Olivier Clément, the distinguished Orthodox author and professor of Eastern Orthodox spirituality in Paris. This is a catalogue of permanent value for all students of Middle Eastern Christian art, and there are other eminent contributors. The text has been available in Arabic, German, French and English. One beautiful French word appears here. That word is *analphabète* and is better than its English-language equivalent. When the catalogue refers to *les analphabètes*, it is translated as 'the illiterates'. But *analphabète* is fashioned from Greek words and a gentler 'without an alphabet' sounds better than 'illiterate'. The point is that the holy icons, in the world of Late Antiquity and throughout the later Eastern Christian world, were designed to inform the eyewitness. The holy images were theologically eloquent. Icons were everywhere. Books were rare. Frederick Barnard's famous observation that 'one picture is worth ten thousand words'¹⁴ confirms what many of us have learnt through the holy icons. It

¹⁰ *L'Art Copte en Égypte: 2000 ans de christianisme* Editions Gallimard, Paris. 2000.

¹¹ Ibid pp. 239-41.

¹² See e.g. *Les Coptes; Vingt Siècles de Civilisation Chrétienne en Égypte* (Dossiers d'Archeologie No. 226 – September 1997). This collection includes articles on Coptic Architecture by Miriam Wissa, Coptic Sculpture by D. Benazeth and an excellent contribution on Coptic Monastic iconography by Paul Van Moorsel. Dossiers d'Archeologie No.233, May 1988 contains an important piece on *The Copts in Fatimid Egypt*, using illustrations of the enormous fresco of the Annunciation uncovered in 1991 at Deir es-Souriani by Professor Helmut Buchhausen of the University of Vienna. The English language publication *Egyptian Art at the Louvre* (1998. 55084 ISSN 1242-9198, Société Française de Promotion Artistique) contains a beautifully illustrated essay on Coptic Art by Dominique Bénazeth and Marie-Hélène Rutschowskaya. The IMA also produces its own quarterly journal *Qantara: Magazine des Culture Arabe et Méditerranéenne*. Many issues refer to the Middle Eastern churches: No. 21 Autumn 1996 contains an important feature by Christian Cannuyer on 'Christian Arabs', including a feature on the Copts. No.35, Spring 2000 is devoted to *Les Coptes*. In the future it is likely that the Institut du Monde Arabe will prove to be an interfaith meeting place. It has already proved to be a major exhibitor of Arab Christian art and iconography.

¹³ *Icônes Arabes, art Chrétien du Levant (Arab Icons, the Christian Art of the Levant)*. ISBN 2-914338-05-8), ...ditions Grégoriennes.

¹⁴ *Printers' Ink* March 1927.

is a pity that words have a primacy over pictures in the European churches. When the German Johannes Gutenberg (1400-68) invented printing, followed closely by the innovations of the Englishman William Caxton (1422-91), the Christian world changed. Even within Orthodoxy there is a conflict between Biblical fundamentalism and the richer world of the Christian image. During the last three decades in Egypt a sharp distinction can be observed between the Coptic *iconodule* and the Biblical literalist. The latter uses an obtuse terminology, 'God says' or 'the Bible says', but the former interacts with the image, expressing an awareness that is sacramental in devotion. Away from the page, but before the icon, we may speak again of *transfigured matter*.

It is frequently and accurately noted that Professor Isaac Fanous was responsible for the re-establishment of classical iconography in the Coptic Orthodox Church. In the West it is not so clear that it was Professor Fanous who introduced many Western Christians to the classical method. *The Technique of Icon Painting* by Guillem Ramos-Poqui is nothing less than a tribute to Isaac Fanous. This great Copt is an acknowledged master of preparation, design, gilding, burnishing and painting; asserting that Coptic iconography depends upon the human form to convey its central theological message of the Incarnation. All authentic Orthodox icons are classical theology expressed in visual terms. Dr. Fanous created a new iconography rooted deeply in ancient tradition, restoring to twentieth century Egypt a continuity of practice. In the West, Professor Guillem Ramos-Poqui stands firmly in the same tradition. The debt to Fanous is clearly stated in Ramos-Poqui's transparent and uncomplicated English language text.¹⁵ The disciples of Dr. Fanous can be found in Egypt and abroad. Dr. Stephan René of the Royal College of Art, London and the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, who studied in Cairo with Isaac Fanous, is an outstanding exemplar of the neo-Coptic tradition.¹⁶ One distinguished associate is the notable artist and iconographer Adel Nassief who lives in Tawaneya Semouha, Alexandria (<http://www.adelnassief.com>). Adel was born on 20 October 1962 in the Beheira Governorate, Egypt. He graduated from the Faculty of Arts in Alexandria in 1985 and undertook specialist studies with Dr. Fanous at the Coptic Institute. He is a member of the Society of Artists and Writers, and of the Syndicate of Plastic Arts, in his homeland. His specialised work in mosaics is highly praised, including his mosaics at St Athanasius Cathedral, Damanshour. He is also an acknowledged master of the creation of frescoes, a skill from antiquity that is less popular today because very few artists have mastered the technique. Adel Nassief has. His icons can be seen in many countries.¹⁷

¹⁵ *The Technique of Icon Painting*, Guillem Ramos-Poqui, Tunbridge Wells, ISBN 0 85532 687 5.

¹⁶ See, *A Coptic Icon in a Secular Setting*, John Watson, Coptic Church Review Vol.14 No. 2.

¹⁷ See, *The Coptophile Column*, John H Watson Watani International, 13 June 2004.

The recognition of Eastern Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox iconography in the preceding paragraphs is of central importance for even the most progressive forms of Christian spirituality, but it would be equally misguided to ignore an appreciation of modern art, aesthetics and the theology of art.

A primary text that relates modern art to what is described as ‘the spiritual ground of all being’ is *Paths to the Absolute* by John Golding.¹⁸ The writer compares three European abstract artists with four Americans. Golding’s careful readings of individual artists and their works are invaluable. The power of metaphor in abstract art is sufficient to enable it to appear as a medium for representing the unrepresentable. John Golding certainly shows that abstract painting at its best is overpoweringly charged with meaning and content.¹⁹ The Anglican Bishop Ian Ramsey (1915-72) was similarly concerned with the probability that all language concerning God must be metaphorical. Ramsey was committed to the notion that knowledge comes from sensory, introspective but also religious experience: evidence that God exists comes from experience, and claims about God must be cast in non-literal terms.²⁰ Ramsey is not a thousand miles from the Russian Orthodox scientist, priest and martyr Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) who, on the eve of his martyrdom in the Soviet Union on 8 December 1937 wrote: “Of all the philosophical arguments for the existence of God, the one carrying most conviction is not in textbooks: ‘Rublev’s Holy Trinity icon exists, therefore God exists.’” And in a further extension of thought in which Florensky confirms Ramsey’s perception of the centrality of sensory and reflective truth: “When I gaze upon the icon of the Mother of God it is her whom I see – not her picture but she herself – contemplated by means of - with the aid of - iconographic art.”²¹ Another Anglican scholar Professor George Pattison has many effective points to make in his *Art, Modernity and Faith: Restoring the Image*, especially in those areas where Christian Orthodoxy may disagree with him. A debate with this book is likely to be more valuable than a period of art-catechism in church.²² Pattison does not finally help us to distinguish between what may be aesthetically compelling in a gallery and what is devotionally befitting in a church, but his is a text that should start an important internal debate within the reader. Negatively, iconography is described as an ‘art of the tribe’, a monastic art produced under strict ascetical conditions, and an art form that is not really at home in the world, though positively Pattison refers to Orthodoxy when he states that “Iconography, then, is visual theology, revelation in visual form”. Even the most Orthodox should listen to Pattison because he understands so well the pressures of post-modernity in which there is no agreed agenda

¹⁸ *Paths to the Absolute*, John Golding, Thames and Hudson, London 2002.

¹⁹ See. *Art and Christianity Enquiry Bulletin*, July 2002. No.31. p.7.

²⁰ *Prospect for Metaphysics*, Ian Ramsey, The Philosophical Library, NY, 1961.

²¹ *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia*, Donald Nicholl, Darton, Longman and Todd, London. 1998.

²² *Art, Modernity and Faith: Restoring the Image*, George Pattison SCM Press, London, 1998.

on religion or art. When Pattison speaks of all sentient beings responding to the structural grace of life itself he may not be far from Orthodoxy, but his appreciation of modern art in terms of a reawakening to the “redemptive meaning of carnality itself” may raise eyebrows, unless we are quite certain what he means.

A key concept in Bishop Ian Ramsey’s philosophy was that of ‘disclosure’ and this ought to be applied carefully to iconography and all the visual arts. A *disclosure situation* is that in which we experience the process of that which is made known, revealed and uncovered, so that we are inwardly conscious of that which is disclosed. That this is a key concept in relation to icons and art should not be doubted. A related category must also be that of ‘reciprocity’ (French: *réciprocité*) where we may speak of mutual action, the interchange of ideas and meanings, the give-and-take of concepts, and, we should certainly say, in the case of icons, of the mutuality between the icon/image and the observer. There is a connection to be made between iconography and some modern philosophical aesthetics. Perhaps most noticeably in the thought of Richard Wollheim (1923-2003) who employed psychoanalytical concepts to explore how the mind and the emotions react to works of art.²³ Wollheim believed that to understand an icon or painting was to see in it something which communicated the intentions of the iconographer or painter in producing it, and that these intentions touched upon what the viewer was to think and feel. Such intentions clearly went far beyond consciousness, and could be articulated as encompassing versions of the primitive and pre-theoretical process that psychoanalysis had discerned. No believer need step back from this investigation. As we meet the icon or the painting our experience is shown to be analogous to the process of understanding oneself.

If we live with the Coptic Orthodox icons of Isaac Fanous (b. 19 December 1919) and the most eloquent Greek Orthodox iconography of Photis Kontoglou (1895-1965)²⁴ it is not necessary to undermine the modernism of others whose ‘iconography’ is of a very different kind. Bill Viola (born NY, 1951-) works in a medium that is beyond the reach of many traditionalists.²⁵ His installations are intimate, portable and silent; they are displayed on digital flat panel screens that hang on walls. Viola uses extreme slow motion to open up emotional expression and to reveal dimensions of religious faith. He creates visual metaphors of both death and renewal and concentrates upon the need for transcendence and liberation.²⁶ Other artists like Audrey Flack (b. NY 1931-) produced works where every relationship affects everything created, but always with spiritual content. In the art of Gustave Van De Woestyne (1881-1947) a modernist figure of *Christ in the Desert* (1939)

²³ *On Art and the Mind: Essays and Lectures*, Richard Wollheim, London 1973. *On Painting and the Self*, Richard Wollheim, Boston, 1992).

²⁴ *Photis Kontoglou: Reflections of Byzantium in the 20th Century*. Athens. 1997.

²⁵ Exhibition Guide. National Gallery, London 22.10.03 – 04.01.04.

²⁶ www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/bill-viola

expresses the bare and emptying experience of entering one's own loneliness as the only access to the contemplation of unexpected reality.²⁷ The lessons of the modern and the traditional are not distinct. From the iconographic tradition to the distinctly modern we may know most deeply, in ways that are beyond ordinary scrutiny and beyond any restrictive system of belief, where our personal truth may be found.

The questions raised in this necessarily brief paper cannot die. Fortunately, these issues do find expression in many countries where Christian iconography and religious art maintain some hold upon the popular imagination and religious consciousness. Britain's leading journal exploring the boundaries between the churches and the visual arts is *Art and Christian Enquiry Bulletin*.²⁸ The ACE Trust was formed to respond to the evident need for a forum in which those concerned with the encounter between arts and Christianity could share their interests. But it should be immediately clear that although debate in this area occupies a central place any consensus is rare.²⁹ In the wider conversation concerning the enrichment of theology through the arts, debate and acrimony sometimes overtake discussion. *Instrumentalism* is generally described as the use of art to communicate preformed messages, and of the use of visual arts in particular to preach. Is modern Art, in all its variety, the handmaid of religion? If it is then Art's integrity is crushed. *Aestheticism* is that other extreme in which art is rescued from theology and operates in an altogether value-free environment. It is a world of art in which the most vague concepts and designs float before our eyes and in our minds.³⁰ In an area that is said to be free of *instrumentalism* and *aestheticism*, the claim is frequently made that modern explorations into Art will lead us into a place where theologians and artists can together explore the Gospel and the Church. What 'language' is being spoken in this dialogue is far from clear.³¹ This is why a theologian and an artist can both find it so difficult to engage in a tête-à-tête. They are speaking different languages, unless they agree to a common ground based upon certain accepted assumptions that immediately define and delimit the freedoms and responsibilities of both artist and theologian. The overwhelming impression from the rather tense exchanges in *Art and Christianity Enquiry Bulletin* is that the processes described by Richard Wollheim are those closest to Orthodoxy and to those of us who focus upon the icons of Isaac Fanous, Stephan René and Adel Nassief. We may learn more about ourselves than we do from an arcane approach to iconography that closes our eyes through our minds.

²⁷ See esp. *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*, Rosemary Crumlin. National Gallery of Victoria, Australia. 1998.

²⁸ In July 2004 (Edition No 39. ISSN 1464 4363) *Art and Christianity Enquiry Bulletin* was renamed *Art and Christianity*.

²⁹ The main protagonists in the debate are David Jasper, Professor of Literature and Theology and the University of Glasgow and Jeremy Begbie, Director of Theology Through the Arts at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.

³⁰ See. *Scandalous Art, Scandalous Theology*, Jeremy Begbie. ACEB, April 2003.

³¹ See. *A Response to Jeremy Begbie*, David Jasper. ACEB, July 2003.

Assaults against images are not confined to non-Christian cultures. There is a certain word-heaviness in all Theology that marginalizes the images. Some Christian assailants against icons believe that they have been instructed by God to attack a work of art. Orthodoxy, Eastern or Western, rejects the iconoclastic injunctions of Exodus 20.3-5 because we have a Theology of Incarnation, but we still have our own iconoclasts. We know the *hadith* in Islam where the iconographer creates a figurative image and is punished by God as a consequence, but we dissent from it. Yet there is a strong Puritanical Protestant rejection of images, asserting that art is incapable of delineating what is Divine. Jewish, Muslim and Christian iconoclasm survives. It may well be true that work can no longer be judged aesthetically, because it is saturated with history, politics and religion. "The point of a Crucifixion is not to measure the palette of a naked human body against the texture of wood."³² The stupefying power of scriptural literalism remains the terror visited upon each of the three monotheistic faiths:

"The icon does away with any objective distance between this world and the next, between material and spiritual, between body and soul, time and eternity, creation and divinity. The icon reminds us that there is no double vision, no double order in creation."³³

Learning to live with an icon might be the Christian and Coptic way of dealing with the central issues examined in this essay. The present writer gives daily attention to a small icon by Dr. Kirsten Stoffregen Pedersen, a sister in a religious congregation and an iconographer, who is known by Western Christians as Sister Abraham, and among the Ethiopians as *Emahoy Walatta Abreham*.³⁴ Dr. Pedersen has studied Iconography, and has the warmest regard for Isaac Fanous, whose *atelier* in Abassiya she has visited. Her skills as an iconographer have been known in Europe for some time, but the present writer has only seen one of her icons, which now hangs in a Dorsetshire study. Viewing this icon consequently involves the processes outlined by Wollheim, Forest, the Sadeks and others in a tireless exercise of energy and grace. This icon is a painting, on wooden board, of the Ethiopian Orthodox priest Abouna Abd el-Messieh al-Habashi known amongst his own people as *Abba Gabra Krestos*. His name expresses his role as the servant - even the slave - of Christ. It shows him at prayer, focused upon his heart. The background is blue, within and above the earth, present and eternal. The Arabic and Amharic let-

³² Zionovy Zink, author of *Mind the Doors*, 2001 and *One-Way Ticket*, 1995.

³³ *Light Through Darkness*. John Chryssavgis, DLT, London 2004.

³⁴ The first word comes from the Syriac *Amma* - Mother - the title given to Ethiopian nuns. The last two words may be translated as 'Daughter of Abraham'.

tering is in gold, inviting recognition of his glorification. The solitary wears white: the pure in heart see God. The development of Icons painted on board was common in Ethiopia, opening the way to personal icons that could be carried about. Some icons may be tied around the neck as sacred medallions. The portability of icons has made them suitable for use at home or on a journey. The ethos, feeling, the message and the spiritual content are absolutely true to the original - to Abd el-Messieh himself. It is because the iconographer realises that she must know the message and spiritual power of the icon's subject that she prepares herself, intellectually, prayerfully and contemplatively, for the painting of the work. Out of a simple creation, with a limited palette, the solitary speaks to us and through him we know ourselves once more. Living before this icon of one who lived in a cave for over thirty years, we hear within ourselves the meaning of this image of *el-muttawahad*, and amongst the sayings of the Desert Fathers we find authentication of Abd el-Messieh's message to us from Abba Isidore of Pelusia:

‘To live without speaking is better than to speak without living. For the former who lives rightly does good even by his silence but the latter does no good even when he speaks. When words and life correspond to one another they are together the whole of philosophy.’³⁵

³⁵ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection* trans. Benedicta Ward SLG. p.98.

(Continued from Summer 2004 Issue)

Part II

THE REAL PRESENCE OF THE LORD (IN THE BODY AND BLOOD) IN THE EUCCHARIST

Rodolph Yanney

- *“Amen. Come, Lord (Maranatha) Jesus!”
Conclusion of a first-century liturgy (1 Cor 16:22, Rev 22:20,
Didache 10).*
- *“O, many run to various places to visit the relics of the saints, and are
astonished to hear their wonderful works; they behold the noble church
buildings and kiss their sacred bones, wrapped up in silk and gold. And
behold I have Thee here present on the altar, my God, the Saint of
saints, the Creator of men, and the Lord of angels. Here, in the
Sacrament of the Altar, Thou art wholly present, my God, the man
Christ Jesus; where also the fruit of eternal salvation is plentifully
reaped, as often as Thou art worthily and devoutly received. (Imitation
of Christ 4:1:9).*

Wait for him, and here He is with you.

The Cherubim were surprised to see him coming to seek them.

And now these heavenly voices are singing in mystery.

Hence you should not seek him in heaven O sinner.

When you seek him, He comes to you in your place.

The altar is your meeting-place, Come and look at him on the table,

He who has satisfied the whole creation with his broken Body.

*Whenever you ask yourself to serve in his glorification among the
heavenly*

The Altar is his abode among the inhabitants of the earth.

St. James of Serugh: Commentary on Ezekiel 1.

St. Justin Martyr, the second-century Roman philosopher, compares the Eucharist to the Incarnation of our Lord, since in both cases the Divine has emptied himself (*kenosis*) and became subject to matter and time. He writes in his first Defense of Christianity, directed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius,

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.⁹

Justin has written this in an open letter to the Emperor, which was read by all people including pagans who had heard various rumours about what happened in the Christian meetings. This was the first patristic writing after the gospels and the Didache to describe the Christian liturgy in any detail. From its beginning, the Christian Church has never considered the Eucharistic bread and wine as mere symbols or allegory, but rather the real Body and Blood of our Lord himself. This is the New Testament teaching as expressed by St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, written in 62 AD, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16)?” “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor 11:29). All the evangelists, together with St. Paul, stress the words of Christ (after “he had given thanks”) (1 Cor 24), “This is my body . . . This is my blood” (1 Cor 11:23-25; Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19, 20). The presence of the Lord in the Eucharist is not merely a spiritual presence but is a material presence essential for the redemption of man, soul and body.

Man could have been saved by faith alone had he been only a soul, without body. But because of the material body the sacraments have been necessary as visible means that carry to humanity the invisible graces of God. The soul can be nourished by grace or by faith in God; but the body can have eternal life only by eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood (Jn 6:50-54). The Eucharist is an extension of the saving action of Christ in the Incarnation. Through it every member of Christ participates in his work of salvation—incarnation,

⁹ First Apology of Justin 66 (ANF, volume 1)

death and resurrection. Since the divinity of Christ never parted from his humanity, one has to believe his words about the bread He gives; it is not material bread anymore, but “the bread of life” (Jn 6:57, 58).

It is necessary to state that the Eucharistic body of Christ is not his dead body on the Cross, although the Eucharist is an anamnesis of his death. It is his resurrected and glorified body in heaven: “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mk 16:19). For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him (Rom 6:9).

The Teaching of the Early Church about the Real Presence

“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (Jn 6:52). This was the first question that confronted the Church about the Eucharist. It was first directed to Christ by the Jews who murmured against him in his first discourse about the Eucharist in the synagogue at Kafar-Nahum. The objection did not come only from the Jewish leaders; “many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’ . . . After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (Jn 6:60, 66). The response of the Lord to the Jews and to those many “disciples” was clear and decisive. He did not withdraw a single iota from what He had said: “Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’” (Jn 6:66-68).

Some Christians dismiss all of John 6 as being completely unrelated to the Eucharist, saying that Christ was speaking allegorically about his teaching or about faith in him. This can be true in the first part of the chapter when He spoke about eating the manna and faith in him (the Greek NT uses the verb *phago*). When He spoke of the Eucharist in verses 54, 56, 57, 58, in all four verses He shifted to another verb, *trogo* (meaning “chew” or “swallow”). In the whole New Testament this verb is used only one other time, at the Last Supper (Jn 13:18). In the English versions we have only one word, “eat,” in all verses. It is evident from the whole discourse that our Lord, when challenged, did not try to withdraw any part of his statement but rather affirmed it since it is related to the Economy of Salvation for which He came. He could even risk the loss of the twelve if they stood in his way of accomplishing the work that the Father had given him to do (Jn 17:4).

The disciples had no way to go except to believe in the words of the Lord. This is the way of every true disciple in all ages. St. James of Serugh (6th century) says: “Our Lord has broken his Body by his hand upon the table. Who can dare now to say that it is not his Body? He said, ‘This is my Body.’ Whoever does not believe is not a disciple. The Apostles believed him, and as He was with them, they ate him.”

Witness of the Church Fathers in the Second and Third Centuries

The Early Church took the words of the Lord as a fact, without any doubt or argument, even without any attempt at analysis or at raising any theories to answer the many questions about how, when, why or any of the other questions that were raised in the Middle Ages. The reason was very simple. Numerous heresies appeared in the early centuries that required responses from the great Fathers of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries in their sermons, writings and major councils. Yet there was not a single heresy that denied the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Some of the Gnostics denied the Incarnation itself, saying that God had nothing to do with matter that is the work of an evil god. As for the Christian Church, the Eucharist was her life; in it Christians used to meet the Risen Lord. Hence Sunday was called the Lord's Day from the first century (Rev 1:10) This is still echoed in the Coptic liturgy every Sunday with the beautiful hymn of the Offertory that the whole Church sings only on Sundays: "Alleluia, this is the day the Lord has made."

Early in the second century, St. Ignatius of Antioch writes in his Epistle to Smyrna, "They [the heretics] abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, who suffered for our sins, and the Father, of his goodness, raised up again." He also writes to the Philadelphians, "Take ye heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to show forth."

Toward the end of the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons writes against the Gnostic heretics who denied the resurrection of the Body:

He [Christ] has acknowledged the cup (which is a part of the creation) as his own blood, from which He bedews our blood; and the bread (also a part of the creation). He has established as his own body, from which He gives increase to our bodies. When, therefore, the mingled cup and the manufactured bread receive the Word of God, and the Eucharist of the blood and the body of Christ is made, from which things the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they affirm that the flesh is incapable of receiving the gift of God, which is life eter-

nal, which [flesh] is nourished from the body and blood of the Lord, and is a member of him? —even as the blessed Paul declares in his Epistle to the Ephesians, “We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” That [flesh] is nourished by the cup, which is his blood, and receives increase from the bread that is his body. And just as a cutting from the vine planted in the ground fructifies in its season, or as a corn of wheat falling into the earth and becoming decomposed, rises with manifold increase by the Spirit of God and then, through the wisdom of God, serves for the use of men, and having received the Word of God, becomes the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ; so also our bodies, being nourished by it, and deposited in the earth, and suffering decomposition there, shall rise at their appointed time, the Word of God granting them resurrection to the glory of God.¹⁰

Tertullian writes early in the third century, “There is not a soul that can at all procure salvation, except it believe whilst it is in the flesh, so true is it that the flesh is the very condition on which salvation hinges. And since the soul is, in consequence of its salvation, chosen to the service of God, it is the flesh, which actually renders it capable of such service The flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on its God.”¹¹ Tertullian also says:

“Give us this day our daily bread” we should understand in a spiritual sense. Christ is our Bread, because Christ is our life. And bread is life. “I am the bread of Life,” He says; and a little before, “The Word of the living God which descended from heaven, that is bread.” Moreover, his body is being acknowledged as being in the bread: This is my Body.¹²

Also in the third century Origen asks in one of his homilies on Exodus:

You who are accustomed to take part in divine mysteries know, when you receive the body of the Lord, how you protect it with all caution and veneration lest any small part fall from it, lest anything of the consecrated gift be lost. For you believe, and correctly, that you are answerable if anything falls from there by neglect. But if you are so careful to preserve his body, and right-

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heretics*, 5:2,3 (ANF, volume 1).

¹¹ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*: 8. (ANF, vol. 3).

¹² Tertullian, *De Oratione*: 6. Translated in Bettenson H: *The Early Christian Fathers*, OUP: 1956: 204.

ly so, how do you think that there is less guilt to have neglected God's word than to have neglected his body?¹³

Besides giving witness to the belief in the real presence of our Lord in the Sacrament, this text contains valuable information concerning its rites and the regular participation of the people in it. Origen also has the same teaching in his Homilies on Numbers (Hom. 7, 2): "Formerly, in an obscure way, there was manna for food; now, however, in full view, there is the true food, the Flesh of the Word of God, as He himself says: 'My Flesh is truly food, and my Blood is truly drink' (Jn 6: 6)."¹⁴

Belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries

The fourth and fifth centuries are known as the Golden Age of Patristic Literature. The great Fathers and Doctors of the Church in this period, many of whom were archbishops or bishops of the main cities, have left for us numerous studies on the Eucharist in their homilies, as well as texts of the liturgies used in that age. Their biblical commentaries did not leave a single text related to the Eucharist, whether in the Old or New Testaments. Thanks to the patristic revival in the second half of the twentieth century, all these texts have modern translations that are available not only in studies of the Fathers themselves, but also in biblical commentaries, and in liturgical, spiritual and dogmatic studies. Only a small sample of these writing can be mentioned here. I hope the references may be of help for those interested in spending their life reading about the Eucharist. The few examples given here will illustrate how the Fathers did not differentiate between doctrine and spiritual life. There were no dogmatic arguments about the Eucharist, the belief was one in both East and West; it was the same whether the author wrote in Greek, Latin or Syriac. The faith in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist was not for arguments and rhetoric but entered into the daily spiritual life of every Christian believer.

¹³ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*. Translated by Ronald Heine ('Fathers of the Church series, # 71. CUA Press, 1981: 380- 81(Homily 13: 3, on Exodus 35). This homily was preached in 244 at Caesarea in Palestine.

¹⁴ Translation in Jrggens WA: *The Faith of our Fathers*. Liturgical Press, Collegeville< MN, vol.1, 1976: 206.

St. John Chrysostom says in one of his sermons on the Gospel of St. Matthew delivered in Antioch (c. 370 AD):

How many now say, I would wish to see his form, the mark, his clothes, his shoes. Lo! You see him, you touch him, and you eat him. And you indeed desire to see his clothes, but He gives himself to you not to see only, but also to touch and eat and receive within you.¹⁵

He also says in his Homilies on First Corinthians, commenting on 1 Cor 10:25, which he also delivered in Antioch (c. 392 AD):

This Body, even lying in a manger, Magi revered. Yes, profane and Barbarous men, leaving their country and their home, both set out on a long journey, and when they came, with fear and great trembling worshipped him. Let us, then, at least imitate those Barbarians, we who are citizens of heaven. For they indeed when they saw Him but in a manger, and in a hut, and no such thing was in sight as you behold now, drew near with great awe; but you behold him not in the manger but on the altar, not a woman holding him in her arms, but the priest standing by, and the Spirit with exceeding bounty hovering over the gifts set before us. You do not see merely this Body itself as they did, but you know also its power, and the whole economy, and are ignorant of none of the holy things which are brought to pass by it, having been exactly initiated into all.¹⁶

St. Cyril of Jerusalem says in his lectures *On the Mysteries* (c. 350 AD), “The Bread and Wine of the Eucharist before the invocation of the Holy and Adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, while after the invocation the Bread becomes the Body of Christ, and the Wine the Blood of Christ.”¹⁷

St. Hilary of Poitiers, one of the few brave bishops who at a critical period in the history of the Orthodox faith stood with St. Athanasius during his third exile by Arian Roman emperors, speaks about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and how this is related to our salvation. He writes in *On the Trinity*’ (AD 356- 359):

¹⁵ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 82 (Adapted from the NPNF, series I, vol. 10, Homily 82: 4, commenting on Matt. 26: 26- 28).

¹⁶ Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*: 24: 8 (Adapted from the NPNF, series I, vol. 12, commenting on 1 Cor 10. 21-23)).

¹⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem: *Catechetical Lectures XIX. (First Lecture on the Mysteries)*: 7. (NPNF, second series, vol.7).

For as to what we say concerning the reality of Christ's nature within us, unless we have been taught by him, our words are foolish and impious. For He says himself, *my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eats my flesh and drinks My blood abides in me, and I in him* (John 6: 55). As to the verity of the flesh and blood there is no room left for doubt. For now both from the declaration of the Lord himself and our own faith, it is verily flesh and verily blood. And these when eaten and drunk, bring it to pass that both we are in Christ and Christ in us. Is not this true? Yet they who affirm that Christ Jesus is not truly God are welcome to find it false. He therefore himself is in us through the flesh and we in him, whilst together with him our own selves are in God.

Now how it is that we are in him through the sacrament of the flesh and blood bestowed upon us, He himself testifies, saying, "And the world will no longer see me, but you shall see me; because I live you shall live also; because I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (Jn 14:19, 20). If He wished to indicate a mere unity of will, why did He set forth a kind of gradation and sequence in the completion of the unity, unless it were that, since He was in the Father through the nature of Deity, and we on the contrary in Him through his birth in the body, He would have us believe that He is in us through the mystery of the sacraments? Thus there might be taught a perfect unity through a Mediator, whilst, we abiding in him, He abode in the Father, and as abiding in the Father abode also in us; and so we might arrive at unity with the Father, since in him who dwells naturally in the Father by birth, we also dwell naturally, while He himself abides naturally in us also.¹⁸

St. Ambrose of Milan writes in c. 390 in his treatise *On the Mysteries*, comparing the Old Testament miracles to the change in the Eucharist:

We observe that grace is more powerful in its operation than nature.... For the Sacrament that you receive is effected by the words of Christ. Now the words of Elijah had the power to call down fire from heaven, will not the words of Christ (in creation) have power to change the character of the elements? . . . The

¹⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 8: 14, 15 (With slight language adaptation from NPNF, second series, vol.9: 8: 14, 15).

words of Christ, then, could make out of nothing that which did not exist, can it not change things that do exist into what they are not? It is clear that the Virgin gave birth outside the order of nature. And this Body that we bring about by consecration is from the Virgin. Why do you look for the order of nature here, in the case of the Body of Christ, when the Lord Jesus himself was born of a virgin outside the natural order? . . . The Lord Jesus himself proclaims, "This is my Body." Before the blessing of the heavenly words, something of another character is spoken of; after consecration it is designated "Body."¹⁹

In his treatise *On the Sacraments*, St. Ambrose answers two important questions concerning the Real Presence. The first is why are the elements still in the form of bread and wine after the consecration. In the second he asserts that the Eucharistic Body of Christ is inseparable from his divinity:

Christ said that He gave his flesh to be eaten and his blood to be drunk. His disciples could not stand this, and they turned away from him. Only Peter said, "You have the words of eternal life; how can I take myself away from you" (Jn 6: 68). And so, to prevent others from saying that they are going away, because of a horror of actual blood, and so that the grace of redemption should continue, for that reason you receive the sacrament in a similitude, to be sure, but you obtain the grace and virtue of the reality. "I am," He says, "the living bread who came down from heaven" (Jn 6:41). But the flesh did not come down from heaven . . . how, then, did, bread come down from heaven, and bread that is "living bread"? Because our Lord Jesus Christ shares both in Divinity and in Body: and you, who receive the flesh, partake of his divine substance in that food.²⁰

In the fifth century, St. Cyril of Alexandria has the same faith. He writes, "We approach the consecrated gifts of the Sacrament, and are sanctified by partaking of the holy flesh and precious blood of Christ, the Savior of us all . . . We receive it as truly life-giving, as the flesh that belongs to the Word himself. For as being God, he is in his own nature Life, and when He became one with the flesh which is his own, He rendered it life-giving."²¹

¹⁹ Ambrose, *On the Mysteries*: 52: 4 (Translated in Bettenson: *The Later Christian Fathers*. OUP, 1970: 185- 6.

²⁰ Ambrose, *On the Sacraments* 6: 4 (Ibid, 185).

²¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistle 17* (To Nestorius, 3). Translated in Bettenson, op. cit., 267- 68.

In his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, St. Cyril also says,

It was fitting therefore, for him to be in us both divinely by the Holy Spirit, and also to be mingled with our bodies by his holy flesh and precious blood; which things also we possess as a life-giving Eucharist, in the form of bread and wine. For lest we should be terrified by seeing flesh and blood placed upon the holy tables of our churches, God, humbling himself to our infirmities, infuses into the things set before us the power of life, and transforms them into the efficacy of his flesh, that we may have them for a life-giving participation and that the body of him who is the life may be found in us as a life-producing seed. And do not doubt that this is true, since He himself plainly says, this is my Body: This is my Blood: but rather receive in faith the Savior's word: for He, being the Truth, cannot lie.²²

Conclusion

It is evident that although the ancient Church Fathers have insisted on the biblical truth of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and that the bread and wine change into his Body and Blood, yet none of them tried to explain how this change takes place, nor did they anticipate any of the Latin terms that the Scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages used later. St. John of Damascus (8th century), the last of the Eastern Church Fathers, gives a simple answer, "If you are asking, how does this happen, it is enough to know that it is through the Holy Spirit."

The spirit of the early Church Fathers is still alive in the Church today, not only in their writings that have been studied in the last decades of the twentieth century, but also in the Orthodox liturgies, most of which are from the earliest centuries. Here are two examples from Coptic liturgies:

1. *The Fraction Prayers*. These prayers of the priest while he breaks the host are characteristic of the Coptic liturgy. The prayer used during the feasts of the angelic hosts starts with a declaration that reflects the teaching of St. James of Serugh with which this chapter begins:

Today on this table is present with us Emmanuel our Lord,
The Lamb of God who carries the sins of the whole world,
Who sits upon the throne of his glory,
And before whom stand all the heavenly hosts.

²² Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* (on Chapter 22: 17-22. Translated by Payne Smith. Studion Publishers, 1983: 571.

2. *The Confession.* This is the last declaration of the priest at the conclusion of the liturgy. In it, the real presence is described in concrete terms:

This is the life-giving Body which thy only-begotten Son, our Lord,
 Our God and our Savior Jesus Christ, took from our Lady,
 The Queen of us all, the Mother of God, the pure St. Mary.
 He made it one with his divinity,
 Without mingling, without confusion, without alteration
 Truly, I believe that this is in very truth, Amen.

Part III

THE REAL PRESENCE OF THE LORD (IN THE FLESH) IN THE EUCHARIST

Western Questions in the Middle Ages and their Repercussions in the East

How? When? Who?

- *This is my Body . . . This is my blood (Mt 26:28).*
- *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 of St. Justin 66).*

How are the elements changed into the Body and Blood of our Lord?

When and at what time in the liturgy does the change occur?

Who changes the bread and wine? Does the change occur by the words of Christ recited by the priest or by the action of the Holy Spirit in the epiclesis?

The Orthodox East has not tried to deviate from the biblical and patristic teaching about the Eucharist. All Orthodox Churches followed the Apostolic Tradition of accepting the words of Christ in faith, without philosophical analysis or mental research. A leading contemporary Orthodox theologian writes:

The Orthodox Church believes that after consecration the bread and wine become in very truth the Body and Blood of Christ: they are not mere symbols, but the reality. But while Orthodoxy has always insisted on the *reality* of the change, it has never attempted to explain the manner of the change: the Eucharistic Prayer in the Liturgy simply uses the neutral term *metabolo*, to “turn about,” “change,” or “alter.”²³

Catholic Scholasticism and the Eucharist

On the other hand, Western churches tried to explain what happens to the bread and wine by the use of current scientific and philosophical theories. Probably they were forced to do that by the many heresies which appeared in the Middle Ages that taught that the Eucharist is merely a symbol for the Lord’s Body and Blood. These heresies, however, have left no permanent impact upon ancient belief till the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. From the 12th and up to the middle of the 20th century, the Roman Catholic Church and the West in general explained Christian dogmas by the use of Scholastic Theology. This was the only system of theology known through all these centuries. Scholastic theology was based upon the philosophy of Aristotle as translated from the Arabic version of his works. These were mixed with the teaching of Moslem scholars; works of Ibn-Rushd and Ibn-Sina became very popular in the West. The scholastics explained the change in the Eucharist as a change in the essence (i.e. the whole substance of the bread and wine are converted to the whole substance of Christ’s Body and Blood), while the accidents (i.e. the appearances of the bread and wine) remain the same. Catholic theologians started these Latin terms in the thirteenth century. They were officially used in the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which the Roman Catholic Church held in order to respond to Protestant questions.

Using the scholastic system, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries spread their respective beliefs to all Orthodox churches. At a time when patristic writings were only in the original languages, the Orthodox had no way of defending their faith against the Protestant missionaries except by using Roman Catholic material. This is how the whole system of Scholasticism entered into Orthodox manuals of theology. Since the 15th century the Eastern Orthodox Church has used the Greek word *metabole* to translate the Latin term *transubstantiation*. The doctrine was given formal approval in 1672 by the Synod of Jerusalem.²⁴ Transubstantiation and the terms used by Aristotle, like “essence” and “accident,” became familiar terms in Orthodox books.²⁵

²³ Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware: *The Orthodox Church*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1963: 290.

²⁴ F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone, *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, 1997: 1637

²⁵ *The Orthodox Church*, *ibid.* 223; Habib Guirgis: *The Seven Sacraments*; Samuel Azer Guirgis: *The Eucharist*, 2nd edition, n p. 223.

Actually the use of the term transubstantiation was not intended to start a new doctrine. It was an attempt by Western theologians to explain what happens in the Eucharist and to answer the old question of the Jews that was renewed by those who started to challenge the ancient belief of the “real presence” in the Sacrament. However, the use of old scientific theories about the structure of matter (essence and accident, etc.), and even the simplistic thought that the change is a material change subject to the observation of the human senses, made the whole doctrine of substantiation incapable of standing against modern scientific discoveries about matter. Instead of essence and accidents we now have atoms, electrons, protons, and all the new discoveries of modern science. This is the problem that has faced Roman Catholic theologians in the twentieth century.

During the last few decades some Roman Catholic theologians have tried to introduce other terms (such as *transignification*) instead of transubstantiation, without reaching any unanimous agreement. Different theologians have understood even this term in different ways. The only way out of this dilemma is to go back to Tradition. This is the conclusion reached by a leading Roman Catholic authority:

The real presence of Jesus is the center of this church teaching. Even a name for this change, *transubstantiation*, though used by the bishops at Trent, was not defined. Consequently teachers should never say: the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the real presence is transubstantiation. Rather, the defined teaching of the Church is centered exclusively on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.²⁶

Protestants and the Real Presence

From the early years of the Protestant Reformation, there was no uniform teaching about the Eucharist. Luther accepted that Christ was really present in the Sacrament. He insisted on the literal sense of the words of Christ in the Last Supper, and he declared in 1534, “The papists themselves are obliged to praise me for having defended the doctrine of the literal sense of these words much better than them.” The Confession of Augsburg, the primary Lutheran Confession of Faith, declares that the Lutherans “teach that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present in the Lord’s Supper and that they are distributed to the communicants.” However, Luther refused the idea of transubstantiation, insisting that the Body and Blood of Christ are present in the Sacrament together with the bread and wine. Later the term ‘consubstantiation’ was used to describe this belief. Other Protestant leaders denied the real presence, ending with a total schism in the movement. Calvin taught that in the Eucharist Jesus bestows his Spirit on the spirit of the believer who partakes of the bread and wine. Gregory Dix comments on Calvin’s

²⁶ K.B. Osborne, *Sacramental Guidelines*. Paulist Press, 1995: 81.

doctrine: "He does not meet the difficulty that what our Lord had said He was giving was not his Spirit but his Body. The Last Supper is not Pentecost." Zwingle, one of the Reformation leaders, denied even that spiritual presence of Christ, saying that in the Eucharist there is but plain bread and wine, a reminder of the salvation achieved long ago on Calvary. Gregory Dix summarizes the Eucharistic teaching of Zwingle: "The Eucharistic action consists in a vivid mental remembering of the passion as the achievement of 'my' redemption in the past."²⁷

When and by Whom Does the Eucharistic Change Happen?

Beside the confusion in the West concerning the change in the elements of the Eucharistic oblation, another question has been raised: When does the change occur? A third question is related: Is the change the work of the Son or the Holy Spirit? In the sixth century, the Roman Catholic Church removed the Prayer of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the *Epiclesis*, from her Liturgy; which had been in the Roman Liturgy from the earliest centuries. This issue may look irrelevant now since the Roman Catholic Church has re-inserted the *Epiclesis*, the prayer for the descent of the Holy Spirit on the elements, a tradition that had been interrupted for more than thirteen centuries. Yet two reasons make such study essential:

- (1) *The need to know the present teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.* This is still ignored at the parish level and in many Orthodox Sunday school curricula.
- (2) The second reason is more important because it is related to the Orthodox faith itself and how far Orthodox churches are following Church Tradition. Contrary to what happened with the doctrine of transubstantiation, in which Orthodox teachers everywhere followed the Roman Catholics, here they preferred not to follow them and kept the *Epiclesis*. Although they kept the ancient liturgical formula, yet they thought in the same scholastic mind as the Roman Catholics, but in an opposite direction. While the Roman Catholics spoke of 'the Institution Narrative' (the words of Christ) as the moment of consecration, that moment for the Orthodox became the *Epiclesis*. Evelyn Underhill describes the belief of the early Church: "For the early Church, the whole of this great prayer (*the Eucharistic Liturgy*) was a single act of worship

. . . . There was no attempt to identify the consecration with any one formula or moment; whether the recital of the Words of Institution or the *Epiclesis*."²⁸

As early as the eighth century St. John of Damascus writes in the East:

²⁷ For more details of the history of the Eucharistic controversy among Protestants see G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* 629- 636, op. cit., and Philip Schaff: *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, 1910 (reprinted by Eerdmans, 1978): 612- 682.

²⁸ *Worship*, op. cit., 136.

The bread and the wine are made over into the Body and Blood of God. If you inquire into the way in which this happens, let it suffice to you to hear that it is through the Holy Spirit that the Lord took on himself the flesh from the mother of God . . . The bread on the credence table, as also the wine and water, through the epiclesis and coming of the Holy Spirit, are supernaturally changed into the Body of Christ and into his Blood.²⁹

Father Tadros Malaty, an Orthodox theologian, comments on this: “St. John of Damascus says that the consecration is not effected by the Institution Narrative, but only by the Invocation of the Holy Spirit . . . The celebration of the Liturgy cannot be divided into separate parts. We cannot separate the positive action of Christ in the mystery of the Eucharist from the action of the Holy Spirit.”³⁰

The Chalcedonian division that affected the Orthodox east did not prevent the spread of new doctrines, as well as liturgical rites, prayers, feasts and fasts, from one church to the other. Father Youhanna Salama writes in 1909 in his book on the rites and doctrines of the Coptic Orthodox Church, that was probably the earliest book of Coptic Orthodox doctrine ever printed: “The Church believes that the bread and wine change into the Body and Blood of Christ at the moment of the invocation of the Holy Spirit by the priest.”³¹ The Coptic Orthodox Church has not been isolated from both the Eastern and the Western innovations in doctrine.

Ironically, in their teaching on a moment of consecration, both Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians and liturgical scholars were mistaken and have deviated from the patristic Tradition in two main issues:

- (1) Applying the dimension of time to the Holy Eucharist, which is an eternal Sacrifice.
- (2) Limiting the Eucharistic action to a single hypostasis in the Holy Trinity.

And now it is to the patristic Tradition that we have to turn, where theologians from all churches have now found their common roots.

²⁹ Jrgens WA: *The Faith of our Fathers*, volume three. Liturgical Press, 1979: 339.

³⁰ T. Malaty, *Christ in the Eucharist*. Alexandria (Egypt), 1973: 472

³¹ Fr. Youhanna Salama: *Precious Pearls on the Rites and Doctrines of the Church* (in Arabic), Cairo (third edition), 1965: 460

THE TEACHINGS OF ABBA PHILEMON

Monk of St Macarius in the desert of Egypt called Scetis

BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD

In January 1960 our tutor at the Coptic Seminary, Cairo, Egypt took us to the monastery of St Macarius in the Scetis in what is known as the Western Sahara, north west of Cairo midway to Alexandria.

In Scetis desert winter early mornings are cold till about 9 o'clock. The Divine Liturgy starts early, and was finished by 6.00 am. We were drinking hot tea at the monastery guesthouse when we heard a heated argument.

The abbot was reprimanding a monk who stood shivering in the cold. It was Abba Philemon as we got to know him later. The abbot was angry and said that since Philemon stayed in his cell, did not come to church or receive Holy Communion for a year or so, he has excommunicated himself from communion and from the fellowship of the community. Philemon stood silently looking at the dust and said quietly 'father abbot I cannot be excommunicated since I have received Holy Communion before the foundation of the world'.

At these words, the abbot jumped in the air and said 'our Lord handed down the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist on Maundy Thursday and you say that you have received Communion before the foundation of the world. You must be mad and I am going to send you to a Mental Hospital.' Abba Philemon did not answer and walked away saying 'father abbot forgive me if I have scandalized you.' The abbot wanted to involve our tutor in the discussion but he refused. On the way back to the Syrian Monastery, I asked our tutor who was a great church historian how is it possible for someone to say that he received the Eucharist before the foundation of the world? Our tutor Fr. Shenouda of the Syrians said that Abba Philemon is a great monk but he feigns madness. He

must have a hidden meaning, which is sometimes difficult to understand. The most important thing is that we receive the Eucharist whenever we can. Days passed, and when I returned to Cairo I went to pray and serve with His Holiness Pope Cyril the 6th. who asked me about my trip to the Monasteries. He asked me about Abba Philemon in particular. I was never able to hide anything from Pope Cyril who was my spiritual father before he was chosen Archbishop of Alexandria, in 1959. When I told him about the argument between Abba Philemon and the abbot, he smiled and said, 'did father Philemon say that? Sure he has now completed his primary education.' I was puzzled and said; "what do you mean by that?"

Abba Cyril was a great teacher. He walked to his cell and asked me to plug in his reading lamp and to switch it on. I did as he told me. He smiled and said do you understand? I said no. Pope, Cyril said, 'my son the electricity is running all the time but when we need it we plug in our equipment and use it. Thus, the plan to receive the body and the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is in the divine will and pleasure before the foundation of the world.' I said, 'I have no problem with this but my problem is concerned with Abba Philemon who is no more than 50 years old and he says that he has received the Eucharist before the foundation of the world.' Abba Cyril said in due time you will understand, but for the time being remember that everything has its origin in the eternal will of the divine Trinity and in his eternal economy.

It was not long before I returned to the Monastery of St Macarius with some guests from Sweden. As I was walking inside the Monastery, Abba Philemon appeared from nowhere. He looked at me and said, 'leave your guests and come with me.' It was my first visit to his cell. It was very basic, one mat on the floor and no furniture. On the floor there was one vessel for water, the Holy Bible in Arabic and some of the liturgical books of the Coptic Church.

Abba Philemon looked deep in thought and said what did our father Abba Cyril say to you? I said, 'he told me that you have completed your primary education!' But how did you know that he talked to me? He said; 'from the heart comes everything and, between my heart and his there is a messenger.' These words, 'from my heart to his heart there is a messenger' are known to those who live in Egypt because they are part of a well known 'love song'. This quotation took me by surprise. I said, 'do you know our secular love songs? He said, 'yes, because everything is pure for the pure but those who have a defiled mind what is pure becomes defiled in theirs. You may hear these songs and become sanctified in the Holy Spirit or become more erotic and come close to Hell.'

I asked him, ‘ how can you say that you have received Communion before the foundation of the world? He said, ‘Paul wrote that we have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. We have the root of our being in the divine will. This does not make us part of the Godhead or equal to the Persons of the divine Trinity but as we are created in time our eternal origin unfolds in front of us as we live our life. Whatever grace we receive from Christ it has its origin in the Godhead. Time unfolds its origin and manifests its goal. We are talking of our union with Christ which has its obvious eternal goal but how is it possible for this eternal goal not to have its origin in eternity itself?

He took some fine sand, which creeps from under the doors of the cells in desert monasteries, and put it in my hand. He said: who carries this sand? You may say my hand or the Earth but according to our faith it is Christ who carries everything by the power of his word. Which attitude appeals to you? Which one is true? Is your hand carrying the sand or the power of Christ?

The first is what we perceive by our mind and it is not wrong; the second is what we perceive through our faith and it has its eternal goal that is Christ.

Our Lord said, ‘ if a man looks at a woman with lust, he has committed adultery with her in his heart. Now, if evil can do this what can good do? If you sit in your room and say, ‘Lord I want to receive your body and desire your blood, do you think that you will not receive them? No, you will receive his body and his blood because the verse of the Psalm says; ‘the Lord will give you according to the desire of your heart’. Believe me my brother the time will come when you will receive Communion according to your hearts desire and according to the eternal will of Christ.

There was a moment of silence at which point I was hearing the wind wailing across the desert. I looked at Abba Philemon and said;’ why then do we have the liturgy? He looked at me and said;’ as our father the Patriarch said to you to receive according to our desire and when we receive we discover that the Eucharist has its origin in the economy of God the Father. The Liturgy reminds us of what is stored in the heart of God and his eternal pleasure. We have two forms of being; the real one is the one, which has its origin in the eternal will of God, he said. The false one is the one that we create for ourselves, and by our sins. The false one sometimes takes over our understanding of our faith.

Word of God and our Lords Body

He said, ‘what is the difference between the word of God and the body of our Lord Jesus Christ? You study theology at the Coptic Seminary and you should know. I said, as a matter of fact I don’t know’. He said, ‘the word of God

is the same as the body of the Lord. Both come from the same source and both have life. The word of God nourishes the inner life as the body of Christ. The first is always available but the second is given in the liturgy to bring us together and unite us. If you start to contrast them you will lose seeing what they have in common'.

If you receive His word you receive His body and if you receive His body you receive His word. Tell me what is the difference between word and body? Both are of the same substance, one is visible and the other is not. The invisible becomes visible through the body and the visible becomes invisible through the word (our body and our intentions are hidden in our words). We need both, for our life will not be transformed unless our body becomes a word and our word becomes a body.

Limits for divine Love

Once I asked Abba Philemon are there any limits for the divine love? He said, 'no limits at all but we can limit it for ourselves when we resist it because God does not force himself on us. He always waits for us to open the door for him but he always knocks because he does not lose hope like us

He made the sign of the cross over the sand as we walking in the desert and said walk over it. I said I couldn't walk over the cross. He smiled and said, 'sin and evil make us think that our hands are more pure than our feet. Do not forget that the feet of Christ were nailed on the cross to give us victory. Christ upholds every thing by his power and he carries you and we say that He will subdue the devil under our feet. Walking on the cross is an act of purification from your ritualistic mind, which thinks that we can defile what is holy but in reality what is holy is more powerful than our sinful nature and we can defile only our minds but what is holy, remains always holy

Words of Spiritual Wisdom

My brother do not think that we shall live forever, because immortality belongs only to God. It is not in our nature to be immortal but it is God's grace in Christ. Thus we believe in the resurrection of Jesus as the message of our immortality and those who speak of the resurrection of the body as the only blessing which we have received from Christ, do not know that it is by his resurrection that we are the eternal children of God.

The Logos (Word) of the Father became human in order that our human understanding of the Father be sanctified in him. In Christ the human and the divine are made one Person so that our life may be both human and divine through the grace of God in Christ.

Why do you light a candle and put it in front of the Icons, the saints are not in darkness and they do not need your light. Can you light your tongue as a candle of thanksgiving? This is more difficult than lighting a candle.

Fear becomes our enemy when we lack faith but becomes our protection when we have faith.

Anger is not an enemy if it is directed to the right target. It is dangerous to be angry with our brothers and sisters because anger invites other sins. But if we keep our anger directed to our fault it shall become part of our repentance and we learn humility from our anger.

If we lust after something let us see that we have this vigor in us and that we can use this vigor when we serve the Lord.

Whenever someone calls you 'sinner' praise God because this qualifies you for his grace.

When we pray we change. Let us keep our eyes on this change in order to receive God's grace.

It is enough for me to say the Lord's Prayer till it becomes my life. I need other prayers in order to understand the Lord's Prayer.

One Psalm a day is better than 100 Psalms if it is said with love and attention.

If someone insults you thank God because when we are praised we are exposed to pride but when we are insulted we have a good chance to repent and be humble.

Unless we embrace the Cross of Christ we cannot pray without distraction.

Despair is the firstborn child of pride. Those who despair cannot make any progress because despair is the murderer of hope.

According to the Gospel, we cannot renounce anything without love it first because whatever we do without love or contrary to love is foreign to God who is love.

Self-renunciation can be a product of our pride, if we think that it is a great achievement, and thus a real test of our humility is when we give up everything even what is good for the sake of the love of God and I mean his love and our love.

Hating sin and the devil does help us to repent because hatred is of the power of darkness, and as we cannot love either, let the love of God direct us when we deal with both of them.

Abba Philemon asked me how did you come to Sketes? I said by car. He said how did you enter Sketes by your body or by your spirit? I said by both. He said why both, if you are one and not two.

He said. 'If you are ashamed of your sins you will never repent and if you confess them to gain sympathy you will never be healed'. I asked so what shall I do? He said, love your self in the truth of Christ. I asked him and what is that truth of Christ? He said the true of which the Lord has for sinners.

What is the best thing we have received from Christ? His life and his words and those who know Him cannot see the difference between His words and his life.

When I was studying at Cambridge I wrote a long letter to Abba Philemon about Biblical criticism. In his reply he wrote no more than three lines which says 'you have to be either a judge or a disciple and you cannot be both. Which one you prefer is what will reveal to you the quality of your heart.

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BOOK REVIEW

St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 107)

The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (Patristic series) 107

Translated by Martha Vinson is Associate Professor of Byzantine Studies at Indiana University. 251 pages. Cloth. Published by the Catholic University of America Press ISBN: 0-8132-0107-1 -1 price: \$ 36.95 (Cloth)

This translation makes available nineteen orations by the fourth-century Cappadocian father, Gregory of Nazianzus. Most are appearing here in English for the first time. These homilies span all the phases of Gregory's ecclesiastical career, beginning with his service as a parish priest assisting his father, the elder Gregory, in his hometown of Nazianzus in the early 360s, to his stormy tenure as bishop of Constantinople from 379 to 381, to his subsequent return to Nazianzus and role as interim caretaker of his home church (382-83).

Composed in a variety of rhetorical formats such as the *labia* and *encomium*, the sermons treat topics that range from the purely theological to the deeply personal.

Up until now, Gregory has been known primarily for his contributions as a theologian, indifferent to the social and political concerns that consumed his friend Basil. This view will change. It has been due in large measure to the interests and prejudices of the nineteenth-century editors who excluded the sermons translated here from the Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church. This new translation will help the English-speaking reader appreciate just how deeply Gregory was engaged in the social and political issues of his day. Exemplifying the perfect synthesis of classical and Christian *paideia*, these homilies will be required reading for anyone interested in late antiquity. The introduction and notes accompanying the translation will assist both the specialist and the general reader as they seek to navigate the complex environment in which Gregory lived and worked.

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

Articles: The Journal invites submission of articles on biblical, liturgical, patristic or spiritual topics.

We welcome scholarly and general articles on these or related subjects, as well as translations from the original languages.

Special Sections: Contributors to the sections of *Book Reviews* and *Currents in Coptic Church Studies* are advised to contact the editor before submitting their articles. Of the extensive new literature, we only choose for review books of lasting spiritual benefit for the reader.

Manuscripts are preferred to be typed double spaced (except for references and footnotes). If possible, send us an MS Word document on a computer disc or by e-mail. Authors should hear from us within one month of the receipt of their articles. Unpublished material is returned only if requested.

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