



## Amsterdam Lectures 2011-12:

### Eastern Orthodox Theology: a Personal Introduction

Lecture VII: Sacraments and Icons: the place of matter in the divine economy.

A chief captain of angels  
Was sent from heaven  
to say to the Mother of God, 'Hail!'  
And as, at his bodiless voice,  
Lord, he saw you embodied,  
he was astounded and stood still...

With these words the Akathist Hymn begins. It contains a play on words—a striking feature that runs through the whole of the Akathist Hymn—‘bodiless’ – ‘embodied’: ἄσωμάτω – σωματούμενον. Plays on words in general throughout the Akathist—generally as here a contrast, or even contradiction—express primarily the paradox contained in the Incarnation—God become man—in particular the paradox of the virginal birth and conception, recalled at the end of every ikos: Hail, Bride unwedded – Χαῖρε, Νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε! Here, with the first play on words, the contrast is between the bodilessness of the archangel and indeed the Lord, in his divine state, and the embodied nature of the Word Incarnate, initially as an embodied foetus in his mother’s womb. The Incarnation is about the embodiment of God in human form, a human form he assumed from the blessed Virgin—one might almost say, the materialization of God. Some Orthodox theologians, such as Bulgakov, have spoken of a ‘Christian materialism’, and they are right: running through the history of the Church there has been a constant fight against a tendency towards a false spiritualization, that opposes the spiritual to the material, and seeks flight from the

material. This was an issue in the time of the New Testament: in the second epistle of John we read of those ‘who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh’, whom the apostle regards as ‘deceiver’ and ‘antichrist’ (2 John 7), as we might expect from one who proclaimed that ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14) and speaks of that ‘which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands’ (1 John 1:1). In the second century, in the context of what modern scholars call ‘gnosticism’, we encounter those called ‘docetists’, who thought that Jesus only ‘appeared’ (Greek: *dokeo*) to be human, but was not really. Many of the Christological heresies, which we have already briefly looked at, have as part of their rationale a sense that God and the material were too set apart from each other to come together in the Incarnation: either it was not really God who was incarnate (Arianism, for example), or God and humanity had to be held apart in the Incarnation (Nestorianism, at least as the Orthodox regarded it). Again, in the iconoclast controversy, part of what inspired those who rejected icons was a sense that what God really requires of us is worship in spirit and in truth (cf. John 4:24), understood to mean something removed from the material. In response to the iconoclasts, St John Damascene, the great champion of the making and veneration of icons, asserted:

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked... (*On images* I. 16)

In his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, John Damascene presents an understanding of the Christian faith, that acknowledges fully that the human is twofold—both material and spiritual—so that the divine economy is not just concerned with the spiritual part of the human, through teaching, for example, but just as much with the material part of the human. His understanding of the place of matter is based fundamentally on the doctrine of creation: because matter is created out of nothing by God, there is nothing in it opposed to God, it is in itself good. And the enduring place of matter is evident in the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body from the dead, as opposed to any understanding of human destiny as being merely spiritual, or

immaterial. This positive appreciation of matter is fundamental to the two aspects of Orthodox Christianity I want to consider today: icons and the sacraments.

I have used the word ‘sacrament’, for that is the usual word in English to refer to baptism, the Eucharist, and so on. It is based on the Latin word *sacramentum*, which means a solemn oath (especially a military oath). The word used for these rites in Greek is quite different: μυστήριον, mystery or secret—derived from the root μυσ- and conveying a sense of something not to be uttered, to be kept silent (or even hidden). It is often said to be onomatopoeic: one compresses one’s lips to pronounce the μ. The word μυστήριον occurs once in the Gospels—when the Lord talks about the ‘mystery of the Kingdom of God [or Heaven]’, hidden to most, but revealed to the disciples (Matt. 13:11, Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10)—but quite frequently in the letters of the apostle Paul. It is usually transliterated in the Latin versions of the New Testament by *mysterium*, but a few times it is translated by *sacramentum* (e.g., Eph. 5:32, 1 Tim. 3:16: both rather striking occasions—the first is the reference to marriage as a mystery signifying Christ and the Church, the second the ‘mystery of religion’, Christ ‘manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed in the world, received up in glory’). It does, I think, make a difference what word we use. If we use the word ‘sacrament’, then the link with the New Testament notion of mystery is concealed. If, however, we use the word mystery, μυστήριον, *tainstvo*, then we make evident their association with the mystery of Christ: ‘the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory’ (Col. 1:26–7). The mysteries are the ways in which the mystery of Christ is made manifest in the Church for the world. The use of the word, sacrament, in the Latin West rather obscures the way in which the sacraments relate to the mystery of Christ. Nevertheless, the word sacrament carries its own connotations, connotations derived not so much from its original use, or etymology, as from its Christian use to refer to something visible that manifests something hidden, or invisible. I think it will be useful to pursue the two paths opened up by both these words.

First, mysteries: mysteries referring to or communicating the Mystery of Christ. What is the mystery of Christ? It is the hidden purpose of God, his intention of

uniting the whole of creation with Himself: a purpose seemingly thwarted by human sin, but a purpose to which God remained faithful. The account of human history, and then the history of Israel, in the Old Testament bears witness to God's faithfulness. As we pray in the Liturgy of St Basil:

For you did not utterly turn away from your creature, O Good One, nor forget the work of your hands, but you visited us in divers manners through your compassionate mercy. You sent Prophets, you performed deeds of power through your saints, who have been well-pleasing to you in every generation; you spoke to us through the mouth of your servants, the Prophets, announcing to us beforehand the salvation that was to come; you gave the law as a help; you appointed Angels as guardians.

God's hidden purpose is fully revealed in the Incarnation of his Son, His death and resurrection: this is the Mystery of Christ. It is a manifest mystery, a mystery that has been declared, a secret that has been exploded, as it were. And yet, at the same time, it remains a mystery, for we shall never fully understand what has been revealed and made manifest in Christ, for it is not a matter of information, but of participation in the restoration of all things in Christ: it entails deification, *theosis*.

The mysteries of the Church lead us to participate in the Mystery of Christ, for the Church is the Body of Christ: Christ is now manifest through the Church and its members. So when we think of the mysteries of the Church we are thinking of the ways in which Christ makes himself manifest in the world now. Christ is not limited to his Church; he can reveal himself in manifold ways through his creation—both through the created order itself, and also through men and women who with sincerity and love are open to the hidden mystery of Christ, the Word or Logos of God. But it is in the Church, in her mysteries, that we discover in its fullness the love of God, that heals and perfects and draws us into the unity of Christ.

That is the path opened up by the term 'mystery'. What of the term 'sacrament'? In his letter to the Apostle John, Dionysios remarks: 'Truly visible things are manifest images of things invisible' (*ep.* 10). This seems to be presented as a general principle about the nature of reality: visible things point beyond themselves to the invisible; they have a meaning that cannot be confined to their visible, material reality. In

considering the idea that visible things have some significance that is not on the surface but needs teasing out, as it were, one often finds recourse to the notion of the symbol. In origin a symbol was a token that had been broken in two and the parts given to two people who in some way belonged to each other, or were committed to some venture; when the two parts were brought together again this common purpose and their commitment to it was reaffirmed. From this a symbol came to mean something that points beyond itself, something the meaning of which is not exhausted by what it seems to be. It encourages a way of looking at reality as possessing some hidden significance. Using things as symbols seems to be a very fundamental human practice: we are not content with things as they are, we confer on them, or find in them, meaning, a meaning that binds us together. The Anglo-Welsh poet and artist, David Jones, expressed very succinctly the nature of signs and symbols:

A man can not only smell roses (some beasts may do that, for lavender is said to be appreciated in the Lion House) but he can and does and ought to pluck roses and he can predicate of roses such and such. He can make a *signum* of roses. He can make attar of roses. He can garland them and make anathemata of them. Which is, presumably, the *kind* of thing he is meant to do. Anyway, there's no one else can do it. Angels can't nor can the beasts. No wonder then that Theology regards the body as a unique good. Without body: without sacrament. Angels only: no sacrament. Beasts only: no sacrament. Man: sacrament at every turn and all levels of the 'profane' and 'sacred', in the trivial and in the profound, no escape from sacrament.<sup>1</sup>

Symbols are intimately bound up with the visible and the material; they invest the visible and material with a meaning that transcends them. From very early on, Christians looked at the created order in just such a way. The first surviving account of the six days of creation—the *Hexaemeron*—by a Christian writer, Theophilus of Antioch, in a treatise defending Christianity in the second century presents the creation as full of hidden meaning: the sea, for instance, provides an image of the world or cosmos, for as the sea is not self-sufficient but depends on water from springs and rivers flowing into it to prevent it from becoming a parched, salty waste,

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<sup>1</sup> Jones 1959, 166-7.

so the cosmos needs the sweetness and compassion of God if it is not to sink into a state of sin and evil (*ad Autol.* 14). The luminaries of the fourth day contain ‘a pattern and type of a great mystery’: the sun is a type of God in its permanence, whereas the moon with its constant waxing and waning is a type of man, in his vacillating state, and the moon’s regular rebirth is a sign of the future resurrection (*ibid.*, 15).

Theophilus find God’s ‘manifold wisdom’ in the animal world which reflects, as in a mirror, many traits that appear in humanity. Theophilus does not go into much detail—he is addressing pagans and simply concerned to show how Christianity, far from being a strange wisdom, is rooted in the created order, but later Christians develop further Theophilus’ intuition of a visible creation, full of hidden mysteries.

This sense of the created order as consisting of ‘forests of symbols’, rather to misuse a phrase of Baudelaire’s, suggests a way of looking at the world as in some sense ‘sacramental’. The ideas of mystery and sacrament converge, and at the point of convergence we find the human. As David Jones notes, it is something peculiar to human kind to take the material world and treat it symbolically, and that relates to the point already noted in St John Damascene that the human is essentially twofold; spiritual and material, soul and body. It is that duality that makes of the human a creature existing on the borderland, belonging to two different worlds that are brought together in his existence. And it is, we realize, the mystery of Christ that lies behind that duality: the duality of the human reflecting the profound duality in Christ, perfect God and perfect man. The mystery of Christ in the Incarnation is intended to bring to perfection in man his role as a being who relates, who brings together—something that culminates in human kind’s even bridging the divide between the uncreated and the created in his deification. That was always the purpose of the mystery of Christ, but in the circumstances brought about by the Fall of human kind, that purpose is now to restore to human kind the cosmic role of bond of the cosmos that he was meant to exercise through being in the image of God, as we have seen. Here, a further term is introduced—the image, the εἰκόν, the icon—which is closely related to the notion of the symbol. In his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, John Damascene begins his presentation of the theology of the icon by affirming that in the beginning God made human kind in his own image. In making images, human beings are only imitating God, is John’s contention. Human beings are not simply in the image of God, as we have already discussed, they make images, and make images as a way of

understanding and communicating. For the Damascene, images are not just illustrations, good, bad or indifferent, they are essential if we are to understand anything. Twice in his works in defence of the icons, John gives list of the different kinds of images, or icons: the first is the natural image—as the Son is an image of God the Father, so that he can say, ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9); secondly, there is the kind of image that exists in the mind of God of what God is going to bring about through his providence; thirdly, there is the human, created in God’s image; fourthly, there are material images and symbols used in Scripture to help us glimpse something of the nature of God and the angelic realm; fifthly, there are images in the Old Testament that prefigure the fulfilment in the New—the burning bush prefiguring the Ever-Virgin Mary, is an example John gives; finally, there are images, whether written or pictorial, that recall events and persons of the past.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that what John is doing in sketching out this list is showing how it is through images that we understand anything—from the mysteries of the Godhead to our understanding of human existence in history.

What all this adds up to, I think, is that openness to recognizing images and symbols in reality is necessary, if we are to unlock the mysteries of existence and, in particular, to understand the nature of the cosmos created by God and brought to its final purpose through the mystery of Christ in his Incarnation, death and resurrection. Particular sacraments, or mysteries, fit into that broad pattern written into the nature of reality by the divine will in creation.

Conventionally, we speak of seven sacraments—baptism, chrism or *myron*, the Eucharist, the sacrament of confession (repentance and forgiveness), the sacrament of anointing (for healing of soul and body), marriage and ordination—but this list of seven really reflects the concerns of twelfth-century early scholasticism in the Western Middle Ages, that sought to define narrowly the sacraments by reference to institution by Christ Himself, doubtless seduced too by the mystique of the number seven, and distinguish them from other sacred acts, which were designated sacramentals, not sacraments proper. The notion of the seven sacraments was presented to the Eastern Church as part of the faith that they would be required to accept in return for union, first of all at the union council of Lyon in 1274. Later on,

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<sup>2</sup> John Damascene, *On Images* III. 18–23; cf. I. 9–13.

in the context of trying to relate Eastern Orthodox theology to post-Reformation theology, both Catholic and Protestant, Orthodox theologians came to think in terms of seven sacraments, because, after all, in contrast to the Protestants, they did have all the rites the Catholics regarded as sacraments. The notion of seven sacraments came to be incorporated into Orthodox Catechisms, for example, the Catechism issued by Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, where it expands the section on the tenth article of the Creed, on baptism. Many Orthodox theologians nowadays, without suggesting in any way that any of the ‘seven’ sacraments should be abandoned, regard the notion of sacraments, or mysteries, limited to seven as an aspect of Western Medieval theology that fits ill with the approach of Orthodox theology, and I would count myself among that number. However, the traditional seven sacraments (though the tradition is, I repeat, not very firmly rooted in the Orthodox tradition) are convenient as relating to the structures of the Church and the rhythms of human life. I shall therefore start with them, and then go on to talk about other sacraments, and finally about icons—all of which I understand as manifestations of the Mystery of Christ revealed in a sacramental universe.

Even the seven sacraments seem to me not a list of individual sacraments, equal to one another, rather they seem to consist of groups. There are two fundamental sacraments: Holy Baptism and the Eucharist or the Divine Liturgy. Baptism itself, however, embraces a group of sacraments: for the rite of initiation in the Orthodox Church includes anointing with *myron*, or chrismation, which is not really a separate sacrament in the rite of initiation, rather the rite of initiation consists of a number of sacramental actions, fundamental among which are baptism, that is, being dipped into water, anointing with *myron*, and receiving the Holy Gifts of the Body and Blood of Christ, but which include a pre-baptismal anointing with olive oil, clothing in a white garment, the giving of a baptismal cross, which Orthodox Christians wear from that day onwards, generally under their clothes, the giving of a lighted candle, and also the offering of the hair of the head: tonsuring. It seems to me unhelpful to think of three sacraments and several lesser sacramental acts; it makes much more sense to think of a single act of initiation, comprising several symbolic or sacramental acts. Some of these symbolic acts have a life of their own, outside the rite of initiation: most important, Holy Communion, for while this is the conclusion of the rite of initiation, it is also meant to be the beginning of a regular participation in the Body and Blood of

Christ in the Eucharist, which will continue throughout the life of the new Christian. The anointings—with oil and with *myron*—also have roles outside the rite of initiation. Anointing with blest olive oil is the central action of the sacrament of healing, the εὐχέλαιον or *soborovanie* (the Greek term meaning something like ‘blessing of oil’, as the alternative Slavonic term *eleosvyashchenie* suggests; the Slavonic term referring to the *sobor*, or assembly of [seven] priests, envisaged by the full rite), while anointing with *myron* or chrism (which is a mixture of olive oil and a highly aromatic substance based on balsam, to which are added various herbs and spices, prepared according to a complex recipe during Lent, and blessed in Holy Week by Patriarchs only, in the Eastern tradition) has at least two other uses: in the consecration of churches, which are anointed with chrism, and in the solemn reception into the Orthodox Church of Christians baptized outside the Orthodox Church. Reception into the Orthodox Church is moreover an act of individual reconciliation with the Church, which points to a parallel with the sacrament of confession, or repentance (penance), in which the penitent is restored to, or assured of, full communion with the Church. This is generally administered simply by a prayer of forgiveness and absolution, but it can be seen as an extension of ‘baptism for the forgiveness of sins’—a reawakening to the grace of forgiveness already given in baptism. Already one can see another reason for Orthodox dissatisfaction with a tidy list of seven sacraments, for there are interrelationships between the different sacraments; they are not freestanding acts or rites.

Within the sacraments already mentioned, one can discern two—not altogether separate—strands. One strand has to do with the structure of the Church: Baptism, the rite of initiation; the Divine Liturgy, the gathering together of the people of God as the Church. To this strand could be added one of the ‘seven’ sacraments, the sacrament of ordination to the ranks of deacon, priest and bishop, as well as the lesser rites of admission as a reader or subdeacon. For the structure of the Church does not simply emerge from within the community of the Church; the bishop, though elected, is not simply an elected leader, deriving his authority from the Church. Rather the bishop represents Christ’s ministry to the Church, not simply in the Church, he represents the apostolate, the sending into the world for the sake of the world, ‘for the life of the world’. Another ‘structural’ sacrament, not included in the ‘seven’, but often treated sacramentally, is monastic consecration: the tonsuring and wearing of

the *raison*, the giving of the little and the great schema—these are not just symbols of rank within the monastic order (indeed they are hardly that at all), but signs of a life of prayer, consecrated to God in community or in solitude. The life of the Church depends on the prayer of all who belong to it, but especially on the prayer of those who dedicate their lives to God in a more whole-hearted way to it than is possible for those who live in the world—as well as the prayers of those who have gone before us, the saints and the martyrs, and above all, the Virgin Mother of God.

The other strand is concerned with the progress and rhythms of human life: Baptism as the beginning of one's life as a Christian, generally for many nowadays correlative with birth (though in the post-Constantinian world we are entering, that correlation may become less uniform); Holy Communion as our 'daily bread', our food for the journey to eternal life; Confession and absolution as our way of being restored to the path from which we have strayed; the sacrament of healing for soul and body. The sacrament of marriage belongs here, too, though it also has a 'structural' role, for marriage is the basis of the family, the fundamental unit in human society, whether civil society or that of the Church. Whatever else may be provided to nurture children, the nurture children receive from their parents—to enable them both for the natural communities of village/town and nation and for the supernatural community of the Church—remains fundamental. But marriage is also commitment to life together with another, to the asceticism implicit in trying to give someone else a part in one's life, as well as the comfort that the presence of another can provide. In this sense, marriage (in this way, parallel to monastic consecration) offers one kind of route through life, and therefore belongs to the 'progress and rhythms of human life', as I have put it. The Orthodox Church (maybe not for entirely transparent reasons) recognizes both the beauty of married love and its fragility; if the ideal is, as the Lord made clear, a union for life, the reality often falls short of this, and the Orthodox Church has proved willing to accept 'the admission of inconsistencies inherent in life itself, and of the impossibility of overcoming them by the imposition of a uniformity greater than life will bear'.<sup>3</sup> To this strand concerned with the Christian life, one should perhaps add the funeral service. Dionysios the Areopagite, in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* includes it along with ordination and monastic consecration

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<sup>3</sup> Words of the poet and Anglican churchman, T.S. Eliot, in another context: see *idem, Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963 ed.), 376.

as one of the ceremonies that he discusses in the second rank, after the first rank of ‘rites’ or τελεταί consisting of Baptism (or Illumination, as he calls it), the Eucharist (or the Synaxis, or ‘gathering together’) and the Sacrament of Myron. It is perhaps for this reason that the funeral service is sometimes included among the mysteries (which is the word Dionysios uses: the ‘mystery of the holy departed’). The solemn farewell, the last kiss, the beginning of the days of prayer for the departed: all these comprise a ‘mystery of holy death’.

The prayers for the sacraments, or mysteries, are full of a symbolism that relates what is happening to the particular person to a much larger, all-encompassing world or cosmos. Let me give two examples. The first from the service of Baptism. The actual baptism – or dipping, which is what the Greek means – is preceded by the blessing of the water, and there being mingled with it olive oil. The prayer for the blessing of the water runs thus:

Great are you, O Lord, and wonderful are your works; and no word will be adequate to sing the praise of your wonders. For as by your will you brought the universe from non-existence into being, by your might you uphold creation and by your providence you direct the world. From four elements you composed the world, with four seasons you crowned the circle of the year. All the spiritual Powers tremble before you. The sun sings your praise, the moon glorifies you, the stars entreat you, the light obeys you, the deeps tremble before you, the springs are your servants. You stretched out the heaven like a curtain; you established the earth on the waters; you walled in the sea with sand; you poured out the air for breathing. Angelic Powers minister to you, the choirs of Archangels worship you, the many-eyed Cherubim and the six-winged Seraphim, as they stand and fly around you, veil themselves in fear of your unapproachable glory. For you, God uncircumscribed, without beginning and ineffable, came upon earth taking the form of a slave, being found in the likeness of mortals. For through the compassion of your mercy, Master, you could not endure to watch the human race being tyrannized by the devil, but you came and saved us. We confess your grace, we proclaim your mercy, we do not conceal your benevolence. You set at liberty the generations of our nature, you sanctified a virgin womb by your birth. All creation sang your

praise when you appeared. For you, our God, were seen on earth and lived among mortals. You also sanctified the streams of Jordan by sending down to them from heaven your all-holy Spirit, and you crushed the heads of the dragons that lurked there. Therefore, O King, lover of mankind, be present now too, through the visitation of your Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water. Give it the grace of redemption, the blessing of Jordan. Make it a source of incorruption, a gift of sanctification, a deliverance from sins, a destruction of demons. Make it unapproachable by hostile powers and filled with angelic strength... Master of all things, declare this water to be water of redemption, water of sanctification, cleansing of flesh and spirit, untying of bonds, forgiveness of offences, enlightenment of soul, washing of rebirth, renewal of spirit, gift of adoption, garment of incorruption, source of life... Manifest yourself, Lord, in this water, and grant that the one being baptized in it may be transformed for the putting off of the old self that is corrupted after the desires of deception, and may put on the new that is renewed after the image of the One who created him/her. So that, planted in the likeness of your death through Baptism, he/she may also become a partaker in your Resurrection, and having guarded the gift of the Holy Spirit and increased the deposit of grace, may receive the prize of his/her high calling and be numbered with the firstborn, whose names are inscribed in heaven, in you our God and Lord, Jesus Christ...

This long and beautiful prayer moves from water as one of the four cosmic elements, through the historical waters of Jordan in which the Lord was baptized, to the water now being blessed for baptism. The one to be baptized is participating in the renewal of creation, not just taking a step towards his or her personal salvation. The same cosmic dimension is manifest in the prayer for the blessing of olive oil:

Master, Lord God of our fathers, who sent out a dove to those in Noë's ark, with a branch of olive in its beak as sign of reconciliation and salvation from the flood, and through these things prefigured the Mystery of grace; who have given the fruit of the olive for the completion of your holy Mysteries; who through it both filled those under the Law with the Holy Spirit, and make perfect those under grace; do you yourself bless this olive oil also by the power, operation and descent of your Holy Spirit, so that it may become an

anointing of incorruption, a weapon of righteousness, renewal of soul and body, a driving away of every operation of the devil, for the removal of all evils from those who are anointed with it in faith, or who partake of it to your glory and that of your Only-Begotten Son and your all-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit, now and for ever, and to the ages of ages.<sup>4</sup>

The other example I want to take is from the ceremonies that surround the receiving of Holy Communion. The Holy Gifts are given to the laity on a spoon, called in Greek a λαβίς, which does not really mean a spoon, but rather a pair of tongs. The reference is to the vision of Isaias in Isa. 6, when the prophet saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and raised up, the whole house being full of his glory. Around him were standing the seraphim, crying, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth, the whole earth is full of his glory!’ Isaias is filled with a sense of sin and unworthiness. One of the seraphim takes a burning coal from the altar with a pair of tongs, a *lavis*, and touches the prophet’s lips with it, saying, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips, your iniquity is taken away and your sin purged’. The use of the word, *lavis*, for the spoon recalls the vision of the prophet, which has already been evoked in the *Sanctus* in the Eucharistic prayer, when we join with the heavenly hosts, ‘singing, crying, shouting the triumphal hymn, and saying: Holy, holy, holy, Lord of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest’. The experience of Isaias is recalled again in the words the priest uses after giving Holy Communion—‘Behold, this has touched your lips, your iniquity is taken away and your sin purged’—the very words of the Seraphim. The particular communicant is not simply receiving communion for him- or herself, but standing with the hosts of heaven, with the prophet, with the saints and the Mother of God, with all the people of God who have received communion over the centuries.<sup>5</sup>

There is one point I have not touched on, which it may be thought I have obscured by laying such stress on the symbolic character of the mysteries or sacraments. For the sacraments are not merely symbols, you might say; the elements—water, bread and wine, oil—have been changed, transformed, they are no longer ordinary water, bread,

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<sup>4</sup> Translations taken from the website: <http://www.anastasis.org.uk/baptism.htm>, accessed 9.iv.2012 (the translations are by Archimandrite Ephrem [Lash])

<sup>5</sup> For the texts referred to, see *The Divine Liturgy of our Father among the Saints John Chrysostom* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 31–2 (for the *Sanctus*), 44–6 (for the rite of Communion).

wine and oil. That is true, but there is a danger, and certainly there has been in the past, of concentrating too much on the change, and ignoring the wealth of symbols that have come to accompany the sacramental rites, as if the only thing that matters is the ontological change in the bread and wine, for example, as if the rest of the symbolic structure could be dispensed with (and has been in ceremonies such as a ‘low mass’, which simply concentrates on the ‘essentials’). It seems to me to be dangerous to think of the ‘merely symbolic’, for the use of symbols alters the way we look at things, the way we relate to people—it does effect a change, which can be very profound. Nonetheless, the language of change is very important in Orthodox understanding of the sacraments. At the time of the Iconoclast controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries, the question of the Eucharistic change became an issue, which was clarified by the Orthodox affirming that the Eucharist cannot be regarded, as the Iconoclasts did, as simply an icon, or type, of Christ, for in the Eucharist the bread and wine are changed into Christ himself, for Christ is really present in the Eucharist—really and permanently present, as the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts makes clear. There is a real change in the water blessed for baptism and the oil blessed for healing—they accomplish something that would not be achieved by ordinary water and ordinary oil, though they remain visibly the same as ordinary water and oil. And in the case of the Eucharist, the bread and wine offered and consecrated are changed into the Holy Body and Precious Blood of Christ. But the change needs to be put in a broader context, if we are to grasp its significance. If the notion of the change is isolated, there is the danger of trying to find some change analogous to the kind of change that takes place, for example, in a chemical reaction—precisely what the Latin doctrine of transubstantiation was intended to avoid, in insisting that the change only takes place at the level of being, and not at any perceptible level, whether appearance or anything else that could be detected by human methods of assessment. As the Reformation debates made clear, that danger was not always avoided either by those who insisted on the Eucharistic change, or by those who denied it. The wider context is made clear if we look at the prayer of invocation, or *epiklesis*, in the Anaphora, or Eucharistic Prayer, of St John Chrysostom, the one most commonly used in the Orthodox Church. There the priest prays:

Also we offer you this spiritual worship without shedding of blood, and we

ask, pray and implore you: send down your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here set forth, and make this bread the precious Body of your Christ, and what is in this Cup the precious Blood of your Christ, changing them by your Holy Spirit.

The invocation to the Holy Spirit is for him to descend on ‘us’ and the ‘gifts’, and the change that we are praying for both in us and in the gifts that we are offering. For the wider context of change is the change that Christ came to effect through his Incarnation—in which God paradoxically accepted change, remaining what he was, God, and assuming what he was not, humanity—the change of all human kind into the image and likeness of God for which we were created. This is one of the fundamental reasons why we Orthodox talk about deification; for what is offered to us by the Incarnate Christ, through the Eucharist and through our being faithful in our discipleship, is a change that will reach to the roots of our being—not some change simply in how we are regarded, nor even a change in our behaviour (though that may well take place), but a fundamental change so that the roots from which flow our actions are transformed, deified, and what others experience at our hands is the cherishing love of God Himself.

We need to move on. If, as I have suggested, we emphasize the symbolic world within which the sacraments or mysteries operate, then we shall see the world of the sacraments opening up, and indeed corresponding more closely to the way the notion of sacrament or mystery used by the Fathers. We have already seen an expansion, by including monastic consecration and the funeral rites. There are many other things that are treated as sacramental by the Fathers: the Lord’s Prayer, for instance, or—a little more obviously—the sign of the cross. The action of the sign of the cross is very ancient (our first evidence takes us back to the second century), and in current Orthodox practice it accompanies every action of our life—getting up, going to bed, before meals, before any significant task, before setting out on a journey... The idea of the cosmic cross—reaching from heaven to earth, and drawing together in its embrace things set furthest apart—is a powerful symbol, giving concrete form to the Apostle Paul’s prayer in Ephesians:

that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in

your hearts through faith; and you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:16–19).<sup>6</sup>

I have left myself little time to talk about icons, but that can be made up in the next lecture when we are going to consider time and the liturgy. From the perspective we have reached, icons are a particular extension of the symbolic world, founded on matter, that we have been exploring in this lecture. Icons, images—of Christ, the Mother of God and the Saints—came to be used widely in Christianity, not just as pictures on panels or walls (frescoes), but on sacred vessels, garments, banners, and even more intimate objects such as boxes and rings. They are objects of devotion, rather than works of art (though many of them are works of art of superlative quality); they are there to accompany our prayer, to mediate to us the presence of those to whom we pray; they are not there for aesthetic contemplation (though many of them are worthy of that). Unlike symbols, they work more directly through likeness; it is through likeness that they recall the people whom they depict, though the concept of likeness appropriate to icons has evolved to fulfil the purpose of mediating a prayerful presence, rather than a photographic likeness. Their justification is manifold—and unlike other aspects of Christian worship and practice explicit, as a result of the century-long Iconoclast controversy from the eighth to the ninth century in the Byzantine Empire. There is the justification I have already referred to, affirmed most clearly by John Damascene, that images or icons are fundamental to the kind of understanding available to human beings who are twofold in nature, both bodily and spiritual. Both icons and sacraments make sense only to beings with this twofold nature, for they are concerned with holding together the two realms that converge in the human. The most fundamental justification is the Incarnation itself: if God appeared in a human form, then it must be possible to depict him in a human form. A corollary of that is what I have already referred to as ‘Christian materialism’: matter is God’s creation; it is not to be despised; it is precious; it is capable to disclosing to us the creative power of the God who created it. It is only because we are material

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<sup>6</sup> On the Sign of the Cross in Orthodox practice and theology, see Andreas Andreopoulos, *The Sign of the Cross. The Gesture, the Mystery, the History* (Brewster MA: Paraclete Press, 2006).

beings that we can participate in God in the Eucharist, a privilege denied to purely spiritual beings such as angels. On that basis, John Damascene even argued that we could be regarded as higher beings than the angels, since we are capable of participating in God more richly than they are.<sup>7</sup>

This Christian materialism has implications, that we have already broached, for our attitude to the natural world: there is something sacred about matter, it is not 'material' for our disposal. A sacramental vision of the universe, a sense of the world as full of mysteries, is one that can contribute powerfully to the challenges posed us by the power we have in our hands as a result of the development of technology.

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<sup>7</sup> See John Damascene, *On Images* III. 26; *On the Two Wills of Christ* 16, 30 (translation of the former, with footnote, St John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* [Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003], 103–4).