



Lectures 2011-12:

## Eastern Orthodox Theology: a Personal Introduction

Lecture VIII: Time and the Liturgy.

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It may be that you are puzzled about the subject of this lecture. This is meant to be a course on Eastern Orthodox Theology; so far we have dealt with the kind of subjects you might have expected—God, the Trinity, Christology, Creation, Fall, Redemption, Theosis, the Church and the Sacraments—and in the final lecture we shall look at eschatology. These are all traditional subjects: all related, in one way or another, to the faith we confess in the Creed. But ‘Time and the Liturgy’: what kind of a subject is that? It sounds either something already covered—in the lecture on the Sacraments—or something a bit too metaphysical for such a course of lectures—Time. I have, nonetheless, a reason for including this lecture, and it has to do with what it means to understand Orthodox theology. For, though there is a lot of things you can learn about the Orthodox Church and its beliefs—lots of history, lots of complex theological ideas, lots of detail about the liturgy, the way it is celebrated and its meaning, lots about how to live the Christian life in an Orthodox way: rules of fasting, ways of asceticism, and learning to live a life transfigured by God’s love—if

it remains at the level of knowledge, information, it is all rather pointless. This is true of any system of belief that issues in a way of life, but it seems to me to be radically true of Orthodoxy. The only knowledge that counts, the only theology that is truly Orthodox, is participation in God's movement in love towards us in creation and Incarnation by our response of love. St Maximos the Confessor puts this very beautifully in his commentary on the Lord's Prayer:

For hidden within a limited compass this prayer contains the whole purpose and aim of which we have just spoken... The prayer includes petitions for everything that the divine Word effected through his self-emptying in the Incarnation, and it teaches us to strive for those blessings of which the true provider is God the Father alone through the natural mediation of the Son in the Holy Spirit... It was on the behalf [of human beings] and for their sake that without changing He became man, and is now the author and teacher of so many and such great new mysteries as yet beyond our understanding... Theology is taught us by the incarnate Word of God, since he reveals in Himself the Father and the Holy Spirit...

The Word bestows adoption on us when He grants us that birth and deification which, transcending nature, come by grace from above through the Spirit. The guarding and preservation of this in God depends on the resolve of those thus born: on their sincere acceptance of the grace bestowed on them and, through the practice of the commandments, on their cultivation of the beauty given to them by grace. Moreover, by emptying themselves of the passions they lay hold of the divine to the same degree as that to which, deliberately emptying Himself of His own sublime glory, the Word of God truly became man.

The Word has made men equal to the angels...

The Word enables us to participate in divine life by making Himself our food, in a manner understood by Himself and by those who have received from Him a spiritual perception of this kind...

He restores human nature to itself...

The Word destroys the tyranny of the evil one, who dominates us through deceit, by triumphantly using as a weapon against him the flesh defeated in Adam...

What strikes me particularly about this passage is the way in which St Maximos understands theology. First of all, the mysteries of theology, as he puts it, are mediated by a prayer, not by a creed or a treatise: we only understand by participating ourselves in prayer. Furthermore, all that follows is seen in terms of engagement with God, flowing from prayer: accepting God's gifts and using them, even more, imitating in our movement towards God, his movement towards us, so that the Word's *kenosis*, self-emptying, calls forth our self-emptying, and love responds to love: 'deep calls to deep', as the Psalmist says (Psa. 41. 8).

How do we participate in theology understood like this? Primarily, I would suggest, through participation in the Divine Liturgy, for it is here that the truths that we confess are not just brought to mind, but in some way enacted—enacted in such a way that we can take part. But if we say that they are enacted, we are suggesting that there is a process, that something takes place. It is not just a matter of registering various truths, but taking part in their enactment.

In Dionysios the Areopagite's *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, we find an account of the Divine Liturgy. It begins like this:

The hierarch, having completed a reverent prayer, near the divine altar, starts with the censuring, and proceeds to every part of the enclosure of the sacred place; he then returns to the divine altar and begins the sacred chanting of the psalms... (EH 3. 2)

In the next section, the *theoria* or contemplation, he explains this rite of censuring thus:

We must, then, in my opinion, pass within the all-holy mysteries, after we have laid bare the intelligible of the first of the votive gifts, to gaze upon its godlike beauty, and view the hierarch, divinely going with sweet fragrance from the divine altar to the furthestmost bounds of the holy place, and again returning to it to complete the function. For the Blessedness, supremely divine above all, even if, through divine goodness, it goes forth to the communion of the holy who participate in it, yet it never goes outside its essential unmoved position and steadfastness; and illuminates all the godlike in due degree, being always self-centred, and in no wise moved from its own proper identity; so, too, the divine initiation of the synaxis, although it has a unique, and simple, and enfolded source, is multiplied, out of love towards mankind, into the holy variety of the symbols, and travels through the whole range of the supremely divine description; yet uniformly it is again collected from these, into its own proper monad, and unifies those who are being reverently conducted towards it. In the same godlike manner, the divine hierarch, if he benignly lowers to his subordinates his own unique hierarchical science, by using the multiplicities of the holy enigmas, yet again, as absolute, and not to be held in check by smaller things, he is restored to his proper headship without diminution, and, when he has made the intellectual entry of himself to the One, he sees clearly the uniform principles of things accomplished, as he makes the goal of his philanthropic progress to things secondary the more divine return to things primary. (*EH* 3. 3. 3)

The censuring of the Church at the beginning of the Liturgy, which still takes place, is seen by Dionysios as symbolic of the movement in love of the One into the realm of the many and back to the One itself: the One moves out into the realm of the manifold, and embraces it, and draws it back into the primordial union. It is a circular movement. Dionysios is at pains to emphasize that, though it is a genuine movement, through love, into the realm of the manifold, yet the One does not desert its own unity, so there is no danger of the circular movement drifting off into cycles of multiplicity. Dionysios understands this circular movement in terms of the

Neoplatonic triad of rest–procession–return, a fundamental circular movement underlying all reality. Beings with reason and consciousness of oneself are capable of participating in this movement actively, rather than simply being caught up in a fundamental characteristic of reality, the eternal cycle of rest–procession–return; they participate in it with awareness through contemplation, through a loving gaze towards the still centre from which they derive.

It seems to me that this circular movement is a powerful symbol for many aspects of what is involved in participating in God’s movement towards us in creation and Incarnation through which he draws us back into union with himself, and awareness of this helps us to grasp what is happening in our participation in the Divine Liturgy.

And time? It is often said that there are two conceptions of time—one cyclic and the other linear; one conceives of time either as consisting of recurring cycles, or as something that moves in a kind of linear way from the past to the future. It was popular, among theologians of the last century, to oppose these two notions of time and see the cyclical as in some sense Greek or pagan, in contrast to a sense of time as linear, moving into the future, which was regarded as biblical. This seems to me an oversimplification, for cyclical ways of understanding time are as much a part of the biblical concept as the sense of a linear movement from creation to consummation. For it is through various cycles, that repeat themselves, that we grasp the passage of time. The day, the month, the year: these are cycles related to the circular movement of the earth, the moon and the sun, and it does not make a lot of difference to our perception of this whether we think of the sun circling the earth, as the ancients did, or the earth circling the sun. There are other cycles associated with these fundamental cycles. The year, for instance, is broken down in the sequence of the seasons: spring,

summer, autumn and winter. The Jewish tradition, as we find it in the Scriptures, adds another cycle: the cycle of the week, consisting of seven days from Sunday to Saturday. Famously, these various cycles do not fit into each other in any tidy way: the month is bit more than four weeks; the year a bit more than twelve lunar months. For centuries an enormous amount of human ingenuity has gone into bringing these cycles into some sort of conjunction. We encounter some of this in the role these cycles play in the liturgical celebrations of the Christian Church. The principal occasion when these cycles are drawn together is in the feast of Easter, or Pascha, the Christian Passover. As the name ‘Pascha’ suggests, the Christian feast is based on the Jewish Passover, or Pasch. The way the Hebrews worked out the date of Passover involved bring lunar and solar time into some kind of conjunction. For the Jews, like the Muslims following them, have a year of twelve lunar months, though, unlike the Muslims, every so often an extra lunar month is intercalated, so that the Jewish year corresponds roughly to the solar year, and the months relate to the seasons of the year. Passover was held on 14 Nisan, the date of the full moon after the spring equinox. Based on that, Christians by the end of the second century determined Easter as the Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox (as the equinox was judged to be 21 March, Easter could occur on any date between 22 March and 25 April). This brings into conjunction three of the cycles mentioned: the week, the (lunar) month and the (solar) year. Easter is the first day of the week (Sunday), occurring in the middle of the lunar month, after the full moon, in Spring, the season in which the earth comes to life.

The revolution of these cycles—their conjunction and disjunction—gives shape to the sequence of time, which would otherwise be—as it has largely become in the secular West—a sequence of otherwise undistinguishable days. The week starts with Sunday,

the Day of the Resurrection; in Russian it is called *Voskresene*, ‘Resurrection’, in Greek, *Kyriaki*, the Lord’s Day, as it has also been called in England—the Lord’s Day, the day of his Resurrection. In an odd way the week also ends with Sunday, the eighth day, coming full cycle on that day. The sequence of the moons also begins with the paschal full moon, and the various seasons of the year are reflected in the festivals of the Church Year. Easter is also a turning point in the Christian Year: preceded by the great forty-day fast of Lent, which ends on the weekend before Easter, with Lazarus Saturday (commemorating the rising of Lazarus) and the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which ushers in Great and Holy Week; Pascha is followed by the fifty days leading to Pentecost (which means ‘fiftieth [day]’), by way of the Feast of the Ascension, forty days after Easter, so a period of nearly three months is determined by the paschal full moon, and the dates connected with it are detached, as it were, from the solar year of twelve months (itself another way of bringing the lunar year and the solar year into conjunction, by making the months, except for February, slightly longer than lunar months). The solar year itself, beginning in January and ending in December, a year devised by the Romans, and inherited by the Byzantines (who thought of themselves as Romans), is marked by various celebrations: first of all, the celebrations of the feasts of the martyrs, and later other saints, generally on the date of their martyrdom, their ‘heavenly birthday’. In addition there are a sequence of feasts with calendrical dates, related to the lives of Christ and the Mother of God: the Feast of the Annunciation to the Mother of God on 25 March, then nine months later the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord on 25 December and forty days after that the Feast of the Meeting of Christ in the Temple, when he was taken there on the fortieth day in accordance with the Hebrew law. The life of the Mother of God is celebrated in the Feast of her Conception on 9 December,

her Nativity on 8 September, her Presentation in the Temple on 21 November, and her Dormition on 15 August. Two further feasts commemorate events in the life of Christ: his baptism, celebrated at the Feast of Theophany, the manifestation of Christ, on 6 January, and his Transfiguration on 6 August. On 14 September there is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy and Life-giving Cross. (There is also a little cycle associated with St John the Baptist, or Forerunner: his Conception on 23 September, his Nativity on 24 June, his Beheading on 29 August, a Synaxis in his honour on the day after commemorating Christ's baptism, 7 January, and two feasts commemorating the discovery or rediscovery of his head: 24 February and 25 May.) Although the year is considered to begin on 1 January, the Feast of Christ's circumcision and also of St Basil the Great, one of the great fourth-century Fathers of the Church, in another way the Church Year is considered to begin on 1 September, the beginning of the Indiction (the Byzantine tax year!), a day now dedicated to prayer for the environment, as also the Feast of the great saint of the fifth century, St Symeon the Stylite, or Pillar Saint. The Church Year, then, begins and ends with feasts of the Mother of God—her Nativity on the 8 September and her Dormition on 15 August—and in between we find ten other Great Feasts of the Lord and the Mother of God, plus Easter, the 'Feast of Feasts', which belong both to the calendrical cycle and also to the Lenten-Easter cycle (Palm Sunday, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost). That gives the bare bones of the yearly cycle of feasts, which over the centuries has become more elaborate; we need not enter into that elaboration.

There are feasts, but also fasts. In the week each Sunday is a feast of the Resurrection, and Wednesday and Friday are fasts. In the year the fifty days from Easter to Pentecost constitute one long feast, and the forty days of Lent, plus Holy Week, constitute one long fast (mitigated on Saturdays and Sundays, because of the

weekly celebration of the Resurrection). However, in the year there have developed other periods of fasting: the forty days before Christmas; the period between the final end of the Easter season, the Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday of All Saints, and the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul (on 29 June); and the fourteen days before the Feast of the Dormition on 15 August. Feasts and fasts are days, periods, in which we participate—by feasting and fasting. The feasts commemorate the triumph of the Resurrection, on Sundays, and saints' days (especially the feasts of the martyrs), and the feasts associated with the Incarnation that made possible Christ's encounter with death and his triumph over it in the Resurrection. The fasts remind us of the necessity of detachment from the world, if we are to participate in the grace of the Resurrection.

In the Church Year, therefore, we have a conjunction of various cycles, that shape the year and enable us to move through the various elements that constitute the events that add up to the engagement between God and humanity that culminated in the Incarnation.

The notion of time as cyclical can be regarded from different perspectives. Plato saw time, *chronos*, as a 'moving image of eternity' (*Timaeus* 37d), manifest in the circular movement of the heavens. The circular movement gave shape to the movement that characterizes the life of finite beings, focusing that movement on the stillness that lies at the heart of reality and reflected in the calm circlings of the stars. The English, or Welsh, poet, Henry Vaughan, caught something of this in his poem, 'The World':

I saw Eternity the other night  
Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright,  
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years  
Driv'n by the spheres

Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world  
And all her train were hurl'd;

The rest of the poem is mostly concerned with those who cannot see eternity, this 'ring of pure and endless light', but are trapped in dark cycles that draw them down away from the light: the statesman, the miser, the epicure. For the notion of the cyclical is ambivalent: we use the image of cyclical movement to capture a sense of meaninglessness, or a vortex that sucks us down, overpowering us. T.S. Eliot called April the 'cruellest month', because it is a month of fresh beginnings, new shoots that spring up full of hope, a hope that will be exhausted come winter. It ushers in a cycle of meaninglessness, a cycle in which signs of hope are mocked. This sense of a cycle of meaninglessness is very powerful; the sense that we are caught in revolutions that entrap us and bring us round and round to the same thing, making no kind of advance—of all this is very familiar. The cycles of the liturgical celebration of the Church—daily, weekly, monthly, yearly—are ways in which the cycles of meaninglessness in which we find ourselves too often trapped can be redeemed and find meaning.

How does this happen? Essentially through the symbolism of the Church building and the services and ceremonies and even gestures that take place in it, and the way these all fit into the cycles of celebration we find in the days and the weeks of the Church's Year, and what might think of as the nested cycles that are contained in it. In the early chapters of his work *The Mystagogy*, St Maximos the Confessor sets up the structures that contain and express the meaning of the Church and what takes place in it. He begins by discussing how the Church may be seen as 'an image and type of God' by imitating and representing God's activity (*energeia*). God has

brought everything into being, ‘contains, gathers and limits them and in his providence binds both intelligible and sensible beings to himself and one another’.

It is in this way that the holy Church of God will be shown to be active among us in the same way as God, as an image reflects its archetype. For many and of nearly boundless number are the men, women and children who are distinct from one another and vastly different by birth and appearance, by race and language, by way of life and age, by opinions and skills, by manners and customs, by pursuits and studies, and still again by reputation, fortune, characteristics and habits: all are born into the Church and through it are reborn and recreated in the Spirit. To all in equal measures it gives and bestows one divine form and designation, to be Christ’s and to carry his name. In accordance with faith it gives to all a single, simple, whole and indivisible condition which does not allow us to bring to mind the existence of the myriads of differences among them, even if they do exist, through the universal relationship and union of all things with it. It is through it that absolutely no one at all is in himself separated from the community since everyone converges with all the rest and joins together with them by the one, simple, and indivisible grace and power of faith. ‘For all,’ it is said, ‘had but one heart and one mind.’ Thus to be and to appear as one body formed of different members is really worthy of Christ himself, our true head, in whom says the divine Apostle, ‘there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, neither barbarian nor Scythian, neither slave nor free, but he is all and in all.’ It is he who encloses in himself all beings by the unique, simple and infinitely wise power of his goodness.

Maximos goes on to apply the analogy of the radii of a circle converging on the centre to both God’s relationship to the created order and the Church’s relationship to its members, and concludes that, in both cases, there is achieved a union that, though profound, does not confuse the beings joined, but preserves their integrity.

In the chapters that follow Maximos shows how the union of differences found in the Church is also reflected throughout the created order. To begin with, he suggests that the Church may be seen as an image of the cosmos, regarded as made up of visible and invisible beings. He has now moved to thinking of the church as a building, and more precisely as a building divided into two: the area for ‘the priests and ministers alone’, that is, the sanctuary (in Greek: *hierateion*), and the area for the ‘all the faithful people’, which is called the nave (*naon*).<sup>1</sup> This distinction he finds echoed in the cosmos, in the distinction there between the invisible part of the cosmos and the visible part. These two parts are closely related; indeed, Maximos says, the church is not properly speaking divided by the differences between the two parts, but rather by the relationship between the two parts, so that, ‘the nave is potentially the sanctuary since it is a holy place by reason of its relationship to the goal of sacred initiation (or: mystagogy), and the sanctuary is actually the nave, since it is there that the process of its own sacred initiation begins’. So, too, with the cosmos: ‘for the whole intelligible cosmos is imprinted in a hidden way on the whole sensible cosmos through the symbolic forms, while the whole sensible cosmos can be understood to be present to the intelligible cosmos through its principles (*logoi*) that reveal its simplicity to the intellect’. The distinction found in cosmos and Church that makes the one an image of the other is matter of relationship rather than separation; it is a matter of connexion, and not division, and it is an ordered connexion, the visible pointing to the invisible realm, so that the visible finds its meaning in the invisible, and the invisible finds its

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that, in speaking of the Church, first, Maximos does not use any technical term for the unordained laity (such as the already well-established term, *laikos*), but instead refers to ‘all the faithful people’, and secondly, *naos* means a temple, that is the whole building (and is still used in that sense), so that the distinction is really between the building as a whole and a special part of it, and analogously for the community.

expression in the visible, and in this way reflecting the close relationship between sanctuary and nave in the church.

The following chapters suggest further images of the church: in the visible world itself, consisting as it does of heaven and earth (chapter 3), and then in the human person, consisting of body and soul (chapter 4), and the soul, consisting of soul and intellect (chapter 5). Chapters 4 and 5 develop a fairly detailed understanding of the spiritual life, moving from the level of body, which is the level of ascetic struggle, in which we learn moral wisdom, to the level of soul, which is the level of natural contemplation, that is contemplation of the principles (*logoi*) of the cosmos, which are all summed up in the *Logos* himself, Christ, and finally to the level of intellect, the level of mystical theology, that is contemplation of God himself (Maximos, while still using the image of the twofold church to interpret the passage from one level to another, also combines them in a threefold image of the church with nave, sanctuary and altar, *thusiasterion*). Chapter 6 introduces a further image of the Church:

just as, in accordance with contemplation that brings about ascent, he [the ‘old man’, or *geronta*, to whom Maximos attributes his *Mystagogy*] called the Church a spiritual human being and human kind a mystical Church, so he said that the whole of holy Scripture is, in short, a human being, the Old Testament having the body, and the New Testament soul and spirit and intellect, or again, taking the whole of holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, its body is the historical letter, while the meaning of what is written and its purpose, towards which the intellect strives, is the soul.

The purpose of all these interlinking images seems to be manifold. It means that anything that takes place in one context has its counterpart in another, so that the meaning of everything that takes place in any of these contexts both borrows from and contributes to the others. There are then profound interconnexions between

Church, cosmos (understood both as embracing the spiritual and material realm and as embracing the visible heavens and the earth), the inward life of the human person, and even the Scriptures themselves. This means that the Church and what happens in it has implications for the cosmos, but also implications that reach into the heart of each individual Christian and his or her own pilgrimage towards union with God; it also means that the Church, like Scripture, is a place where God has made himself known, and this being made known is not just, or even, a matter of information, but rather a matter of participation in God himself through his activities or energies.

Already by Maximos' time in the seventh century, the church building was conceived as a little cosmos, just as the human being is in the teaching of the Fathers. In the succeeding centuries this became more and more manifest. The church building evolved to acquire a central dome, within which was depicted Christ Pantokrator, the ruler of all, gazing down from heaven to the people gathered on earth in the church building. Heaven, however, appeared not just above, but ahead, for the sanctuary—or altar—separated from the nave by a screen represents heaven, as we recall from Maximos' series of images. The screen, over the centuries, became more and more elaborate, so that nowadays the screen, the iconostasis, consists of rows of icons, depicting Christ, the Mother of God and the saints, who, as it were, gaze at us from the threshold of heaven. In the altar itself there is generally an apse in which is depicted the Mother of God, for the Mother of God is regarded as a living Temple, in which God dwelt in order to become human, and who shows us Christ and draws us to Him. The representation of heaven, both above and ahead, combines, as it were the sense of time as both cyclical and linear. The experience of time in the Church is both a 'moving image of the eternity'—eternity represented in the dome, and as well a movement from the nave to the sanctuary, from earth to heaven, a movement that

meets God's movement to us in the Incarnation. Much of the symbolism of the liturgical services underlines all this. There is movement from the sanctuary to the nave—pre-eminently the Little Entrance with the Gospel in the Divine Liturgy or with incense at Vespers, and the Great Entrance with the Holy Gifts. The deacon, too, comes out from the sanctuary to sing the litanies, to bring before God the needs of those in the church, and then returns into the sanctuary. Moving between sanctuary and nave, heaven and earth, the deacon is compared to the angels, and his free-flowing stole or orarion is understood as a symbol of his freedom. Generally when the priest appears at the holy doors in the centre of the iconostasis, it is to give a blessing: Peace to all! The wishing of peace was an ancient Jewish greeting, and you can still hear the greeting 'Shalom' in the streets of Jerusalem. But for Christians it has a more precise significance, for it is the greeting of the risen Christ in the Gospels, and the priest's, or the bishop's, greeting, 'Peace to all', recalls that. There are other aspects of the liturgical services that recall the Resurrection, not least the recitation after communion in the Russian tradition of various verses relating to the Resurrection, leading into the beginning of the ninth ode at Easter Matins—'Shine, shine, O New Jerusalem'—and ending with the verse: 'Christ, great and most holy Passover! Wisdom and Word and Power of God! Grant that we may partake of you more fully in the day without evening of your Kingdom'. For it is the Resurrection that makes the difference; it is the Resurrection that makes possible the transformation of the death-dealing cycles of fallen life into the round dance of the Resurrection.

Outside the Divine Liturgy of the Eucharist, there are three occasions when there takes place in church what is actually called a dance—a dance that involves a circling movement, widdershins, or anti-clockwise—and those occasions are baptism, the

wedding service, and ordination (in the latter two cases it is called the Dance of Isaias, because it invokes the prophet Isaias and uses verses from his prophecy—the same verses at both services, though in a different order—are sung to accompany the dance). In the case of baptism and the wedding service the dance takes place in the nave, around the font or a table set out in the church; in the case of ordination, the dance takes place round the holy table in the sanctuary.

In her book on the symbolic significance of the ceremonies of a Greek village, *Cosmos, Life, and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village*, Juliet du Boulay points out how the round dance that is such a feature of many occasions in village life reflects the circular movements in the Church's liturgy, so that each is taken into the other: the dance in the village relating the concerns of everyday life to the services in the Church, and the cycles in the Church—in the ceremonies and in the cycles of the day, the month, the year—giving meaning and healing to the marred nature of fallen life.

Dr du Boulay has this to say:

The fallen world, then, is a living presence alongside the unfallen one; but it is felt to be possible at any time to make a reconnection with the timeless world beyond this middle ground of the cosmos and of time, and this in turn brings about a series of radical transformations.

The action which is felt to reconnect with this timeless world, and to transform the doomed cycle of the fallen world, has been described again and again in the typical sayings of the villagers. It is the movement away from the evil choice towards the good, away from the devil and towards Christ, from the fallen consciousness and towards the paradisaical one. This movement of the Church's liturgy further defines as being from the remorseless sequence of cause and effect, sin and punishment, power and subjection, fate and suffering, which are locked together in the linear stream of this world's time, and towards the potentialities of the present moment, 'Today'. For in the eternal 'Today', the liberating energies of the risen Christ, and the intercession of the

holy figures of the Church who have already been sanctified by him, can draw the powerless, the sinner, and the fated back into the divine world.<sup>2</sup>

‘At any time’, ‘today’: this very moment—the ‘today’ of the liturgical action, in which we find ourselves present, fundamentally at the Paschal mystery—the death and resurrection of Christ—but also at all the moments of sacred time that we celebrate in the course of the Christian Year. So it is that many of the songs for the great feasts begin ‘today’:

At the Entry of the Mother of God: ‘Today is the prelude of the good pleasure of God... In the Temple of God the Virgin is revealed...’;

At Christmas: ‘Today the Virgin gives birth to him who is above all being, and the earth offers a cave to him whom no one can approach...’;

At Theophany (in the West, Epiphany): ‘Today you have appeared to the inhabited world... You have come, you have appeared, the unapproachable Light’

At the Annunciation: ‘Today is the crowning moment of our salvation, and the unfolding of the eternal mystery: the Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin...’

This sense of an eternal present, not so much the re-enacting of the saving events celebrated, but rather our finding ourselves in the presence of these events, is realized throughout the Divine Liturgy, especially at the reading of the Gospel, when the deacon reads from the Gospel Book, symbolizing Christ himself, and here and now as we stand in Church we listen to the words of the Saviour, and reaches its culmination in the Eucharistic prayer, or the anaphora, in which, at the invocation of the Holy

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<sup>2</sup> Juliet du Boulay, *Cosmos, Life, and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village* (Limni, 2009), 400.

Spirit, we find ourselves present with the risen Christ, and in the Holy Gifts receive His sacred Body and precious Blood. Here we find ourselves restored to the source of life, receiving the ‘heavenly and awesome Mysteries... with a pure conscience, for forgiveness of sins and pardon of offences, for communion of the Holy Spirit, for inheritance of the Kingdom of heaven, and for boldness before you, not for judgment or condemnation’.

I would go one step further, in this series of lectures on Orthodox theology, and suggest that beyond all the obvious ways of testing the truth of Orthodox doctrine—conformity with the Sacred Scriptures, with the witness of the Holy Fathers, with the Creeds, with the dogmas proclaimed at the Œcumenical Councils of the Church—there is another, more immediate test: does what we believe find its counterpart in the way we pray in the Divine Liturgy? It is a simple test, but an immediate one: for the doctrine of the Trinity, of the Incarnation, of human sin and our need for redemption, the victory of the Cross and the grace of the Resurrection, forgiveness and repentance, love and deification, the intercession of the saints and especially of the Mother of God—all of these are implicit in the prayers we offer in the Liturgy, implicit, not just as doctrines, but as truths that express the mystery in which we participate through the prayer of the Church, with the Divine Liturgy at its heart.