

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

---

School of Theology and Seminary Graduate  
Papers/Theses

School of Theology and Seminary

---

5-5-2007

## “Allegorical Typologies” of the Eucharist: An Analysis of Some Eastern Liturgical Commentaries

Nathaniel G. Costa

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Costa, Nathaniel G., “Allegorical Typologies” of the Eucharist: An Analysis of Some Eastern Liturgical Commentaries” (2007). *School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses*. 12.  
[https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot\\_papers/12](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/12)

This Graduate Paper is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

“Allegorical Typologies” of the Eucharist:  
An Analysis of Some Eastern Liturgical Commentaries

by

Nathaniel G. Costa

350 Noxontown Rd.  
Middletown, DE 19709

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of School of Theology of Saint John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
Saint John’s University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

May 5, 2007

This Paper was written under the direction of

---

R. Kevin Seasoltz

“Allegorical Typologies” of the Eucharist:  
An Analysis of Some Eastern Liturgical Commentaries

Description of the project:

This paper examines four Eastern liturgical commentaries for their allegorical and typological understandings of the divine liturgy and its symbolic structures: the *Baptismal* or *Catechetical Commentaries* of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428); *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 5<sup>th</sup> century); *The Church's Mystagogy* of Maximus the Confessor (580-662); *Ecclesiastical History and Mystical Contemplation* of Germanus (c. 730). These typologies relate the elements and rites of the Eucharist to other historical events or higher realities, from historical reenactments of the life of Christ and the prefiguring of the heavenly kingdom, to the mind and soul's symbolic journey toward the divine, to an ultimate synthesis of a cosmic liturgy, representing heaven on earth. Such readings to a certain degree reflect the Antiochene tendency toward literal understanding and historical typology as well as typically Alexandrian methods of allegory and anagogy, but they are often dismissed by modern readers as simplistic and uncritical conceptions of liturgy. More careful examination of some of these commentaries and their methods of “reading” liturgy reveals a certain richness and creativity for understanding Eucharistic re-presentation, particularly when multivalent associations are held in balance and not reduced to a single dramatic or historical account.

This paper may be duplicated.

---

May 7, 2007

Liturgical commentaries develop in the fourth and fifth centuries in response to the numbers of people entering the now official Christian churches. They first appear as mystagogy of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist for new initiates and later develop into more elaborate explanations and demonstrations of the significance of the liturgical rites for the more specialized audiences of monastic communities. Writers of liturgical commentary throughout this period tend to “read” the liturgy as they read scripture, first for a basic literal understanding of the rite or text and then for a deeper, spiritual meaning. This spiritual understanding can be further broken down into an allegorical method, a representational approach; a tropological method, which raises the level of allegorical approach to consider moral consequences of literal or figurative correspondences; and the anagogical, leading the reader or participant to contemplate a heavenly or eschatological reality.<sup>1</sup> These three “allegorical typologies,”<sup>2</sup> which relate the elements and rites of the Eucharist to other historical events or higher realities, are the primary ones found in early Eastern liturgical commentaries through the time of the ninth-century iconoclasm. While representational understandings of liturgy are often derided, a close examination of four early Eastern liturgical commentaries and an analysis of their method and process of reading the liturgy demonstrate the richness available to such readings, particularly when multivalent representations are held in creative tension.

### **I. Theodore of Mopsuestia: Antiochene Representational Allegory and Images of the Heavenly Reality**

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Meyendorff, trans. and intro., *St. Germanus of Constantinople: On the Divine Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 24-5 and Robert Taft, “The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm,” *Dunbarton Oaks Papers* 34-35 (1980-81), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Enrico Mazza distinguishes between allegory and typology, considering typology as objective correspondence between events, either prophetic or commemorative, and allegory as more dangerously abstract and arbitrary. See Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989), 11. This distinct understanding of typology would presumably include reading Old Testament parallels or the life of Christ in the Eucharistic rite, as well as suggestions of the eschatological reality. By “allegorical typology” I mean the use of allegory in a generally objective framework.

The *Baptismal* or *Catechetical Commentaries* of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) are considered representative of the Antiochene tradition, presenting a literal exegesis of the liturgy, with little direct allegorical connection to the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Theodore emphasizes viewing liturgy as symbolizing the economy of salvation history realized in Christ's passion and resurrection. For Theodore, the Eucharistic liturgy looks both forward as a prefiguration of the heavenly kingdom and backward as an anamnestic representation of the salvific acts of the life of Christ.

From the beginning of his two homilies on the Eucharist, numbered 15 and 16, Theodore is conceiving of his purposes allegorically and analogically. Writing mystagogy for candidates newly initiated into the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, he presents two stages of initiation: In the first, as babies are wrapped in swaddling-clothes after they are born to keep their soft and newly-shaped bodies from harm and allow their bodies to maintain their shape, so too have the candidates been wrapped in the swaddling-bands of instruction, after their recent birth in baptism, "to let the memory of the grace [they] have received harden within [them]" (15.1). Only later are they given their natural food in the form of instruction, "for [they] need to know what it is and precisely where its greatness lies." In these two stages Theodore elucidates a theological understanding of the connection between the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, creating parallel structures for mystagogical and liturgical catechesis and explaining the symbols of the liturgical events: "Since we are born now at baptism symbolically and by signs, we need also to receive under the same symbols nourishment which is in keeping with the new life we receive at baptism, and which will enable us to preserve this life" (15.2). His commentary uses allegory as a specifically didactic tool to awaken in the initiates an understanding of the Eucharistic rite.

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century* (Slough, UK: St. Paul Publications, 1971), 173-4. Quotations from Theodore's Baptismal homilies come from this translation. Yarnold takes the liberty of adapting Theodore's "turgid" prose into good English.

As a mystagogical homily for the initiates, Theodore's work also employs necessarily exhortative rhetoric. Generally, he does not simply equate items or actions within the liturgy with heavenly realities or prior events of Christ's salvation. While one-to-one correspondences exist, a combination of the liturgical symbols and participants and the faith to recognize the transcendence of the symbols is also required to consider these other realities:

Every time, then, there is performed the liturgy of this awesome sacrifice, which is the clear image of the heavenly realities, *we should imagine* that we are in heaven. *Faith enables us* to picture in our minds the heavenly realities, as we remind ourselves that the same Christ who is in heaven, who died for us, rose again and ascended to heaven, is now being immolated under these symbols. *So when faith enables our eyes* to contemplate the commemoration that takes place now, we are brought again to see his death, resurrection and ascension, which have already taken place for our sake (15.20).

*We ought to believe* that the bishop who is now at the altar is playing the part of this High Priest [as Christ]. ... *we ought to believe* that the deacons are, so to speak, presenting an image of the liturgy of the invisible powers (15.21).

With these representations couched in hortatory and conditional language, rendered above in italics, Theodore encourages the initiates to transcend or suspend belief in the present reality and imagine a heavenly order.<sup>4</sup> The liturgy is not merely play-acting or bald representation based on Biblical typology; it requires a subtle understanding that maintains a comfortable balance between the present reality and the heavenly, an ineffable relationship, understood and expressed by the only means capable for human beings, faith and visual representation. Theodore's explanation of the role of the bishop demonstrates the distinct and balanced levels of representation:

[The bishop] is not offering his own sacrifice, for he is not the real High Priest here: he only performs a kind of representation of the liturgy of this sacrifice that is too great for words. By this means he performs for you a visible representation of these indescribable heavenly duties (15.21).

---

<sup>4</sup> This line of argument depends greatly on a presumably accurate rendering of the tone of the original Syriac. Similar language exists throughout the two homilies, in distinction from the works of later liturgical commentators whose language tends to be more direct.

Here the present reality still remains: the bishop is still the bishop, yet he is representing the high priest just as the deacons represent the ministering angels, such as those attending Christ at his birth and after his temptation and those who announced his resurrection and ascension (15.21), not only in function but in dress as well. Faith and this understanding allow this visual representation to remain in healthy and instructive balance with the present reality.

While these correspondences place the liturgical participants within the heavenly sphere, Theodore also demonstrates his dual understanding of liturgy as not only showing continuity between the earthly and heavenly but also representing the salvific acts of Christ's life:

The liturgy leads us on to what is to come, for we know that it contains, as it were, an image of the mysterious dispensation [οἰκονομία] of Christ our Lord, and affords us a shadowy vision of what took place. Accordingly at the sight of the bishop we form in our hearts a kind of image of Christ our Lord sacrificing himself to save us and give us life. At the sight of the deacons who serve at the ceremony we think of the invisible ministering powers who officiate at this mysterious liturgy; for the deacons bring this sacrifice—or rather the symbols of the sacrifice—and lay it out on the awesome altar (15.24).

Theodore here conceives of the liturgy as both anagogical, leading the participants to an understanding of an eschatological reality and ultimately to a time when signs and sacraments are not needed, and also as a historical typology of the working out of salvation in Christ.

From the transfer of the gifts, as yet unconsecrated, to the distribution of communion, Theodore presents a complete liturgical allegory based on Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, beginning here with the passion:

By means of the signs we must see Christ now being led away to his passion and again later when he is stretched out on the altar to be immolated for us. When the offering which is about to be presented is brought out in the sacred vessels, on the paten and in the chalice, you must imagine that Christ our Lord is being led out to his passion ... (15.25).

The bread placed on the altar, "as if in a tomb ... completes the representation of the passion" (ibid.). The cloths the deacons spread on the altar "remind us of the winding-sheets" in which Christ was buried (15.26), and the fans they wave in veneration remind all present to regard the



body as awesome and truly holy (15.27). The ensuing silence of those present “in fearful recollection and silent prayer” parallels the fearful silence of the disciples who withdrew to the upper room “in great recollection and fear” (15.28). These actions are all conscious anamnetic re-presentations of the life of Christ for the participants in the liturgy: “We re-enact angelic service in commemoration of those who during the Lord’s passion and death at every moment came and stood by” (15.27).

The Eucharistic liturgy continues in a similar vein. The epiclesis is the appointed moment for resurrection, the time when Christ “pour[s] out his grace upon us all” (16.11). The words of institution display a particularly historical-representational meaning of the passion: The bread placed on the altar, “as if in a tomb ... completes the representation of the passion.” The cloths the deacons spread on the altar “remind us of the winding-sheets” in which Christ was buried (15.26), and the fans they wave in veneration remind all present to regard the body as awesome and truly holy (15.27). The ensuing silence of those present “in fearful recollection and silent prayer” parallels the fearful silence of the disciples who withdrew to the upper room “in great recollection and fear” (15.28). These actions are all conscious anamnetic re-presentations for the participants in the liturgy: “We re-enact angelic service in commemoration of those who during the Lord’s passion and death at every moment came and stood by” (15.27).

The first saying [‘This is my body ... ’] referred to his passion, the second [‘This is my blood’] to the cruelty and length of it, which caused so much blood to be shed. So it is appropriate that we too should follow this tradition and set both bread and wine on the altar as a sign of what took place ... (16.16).

The bishop breaks the bread for distribution to the congregation “just as our Lord shared himself out in his appearances, appearing to different people at different times, and finally to a great gathering” (16.18).

In sum, the fullness of Christ's salvific work has been re-presented in this Eucharistic liturgy: "In the symbols that have been enacted, [Christ] rose out of the dead from the altar, as if from a tomb; he appears and comes close to us and, when we receive him in communion, he announced to us his resurrection" (16.26). Theodore presents a reading of liturgy in which Christ's saving actions are re-enacted. It is to this historical anamnetic function of liturgy that he calls the mind of the initiates, together with an image of the present heavenly reality. Both representations are enacted together and are suspended in balance in a complementary fashion such that each exists powerfully, and yet neither outweighs the other.

While Robert Taft is right in that Theodore does not present an ordered Old Testament typology but is simply "applying to the liturgy methods of patristic exegesis,"<sup>5</sup> Theodore does recall the prophet's awe-inspiring vision from Isaiah 6 of the seraphim declaiming "Holy, Holy, Holy" and his recognition of sinful human nature in order to identify the Eucharist as a gift of forgiveness of sin. A burning coal, touched to the lips of the prophet with tongs by one of the Seraphim, cleanses him of guilt and sin and thus prefigures the Eucharist: "The burning coal on the altar stands for the sacrament which was to be given to us" (16.36). Originally black and cold, it becomes bright and warm touched by fire; so too does ordinary bread and wine become spiritual and immortal food by the fire of the Holy Spirit. Theodore encourages the initiates to imitate the prophet, "pierced with sorrow and tormented by his conscience because of sin" (16.37), and to have confidence in the grace of the Spirit to abolish all sins. In the actual reception of communion, the seraph's use of tongs parallels the presence of the bishop; both act as an intermediary between the gift of the body of Christ and the mortal receiver, and thus are able to turn fear of the divine presence to confidence. Here, Theodore engages in an isolated case of Old Testament allegory, recollecting this vision of Isaiah in the celebration of the Eucharist. It

---

<sup>5</sup> Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church," 65.

is both an analogue and a prefiguration of the present celebration, and thus an exception to Theodore's dual framework of reading the liturgy as a re-enactment of salvation history in Christ and participation in heavenly reality.

## II. Pseudo-Dionysius: Alexandrian Anagogy toward Union with the Divine

Contrasting Theodore's Antiochene reading of liturgy is that of Pseudo-Dionysius, typically Alexandrian for its anagogical purpose of directing the soul by means of material symbols to participation in conceptual, heavenly realities. Dionysius' treatise *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* presents what became "the model for later Byzantine explicators of the liturgy,"<sup>6</sup> according to Hans-Joachim Schulz, from the sixth to fifteenth centuries. This probable fifth-century work as a whole contains Dionysius' contemplation of the mystical meaning of ecclesial structures, the earthly and heavenly hierarchies, which mediate the divine illumination stemming from the Trinity through the angels and ordained clergy to the faithful. Liturgical sacraments lead the faithful in tracing back meaning through the hierarchies to the ultimate divine source:<sup>7</sup>

... sacred symbols are actually the perceptible tokens of the conceptual things. They show the way to them and lead to them, and the conceptual things are the source and understanding underlying the perceptible manifestations of hierarchy (I.2.3).<sup>8</sup>

Eucharist achieves the conceptual reality by overcoming the divisiveness of human sin and achieving unification with the divine.<sup>9</sup> Dionysius calls Eucharist the *synaxis* ("gathering")<sup>10</sup> calling attention to the "leading or drawing together" (σύν + ἄγω) effected in this sacrament. Above all other sacraments, Eucharist "divinely bring[s] about a spiritual gathering to the One for him who receives the sacrament ... perfecting in fact his communion with God" (III.1).

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Joachim Schulz, *The Byzantine Liturgy*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-6.

<sup>8</sup> All quotations from *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* are taken from a translation by Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church," 61.

<sup>10</sup> Luibheid, 209, n. 51.

Dionysius depicts no parallel heavenly liturgy, as there is in Theodore's commentary, nor does he mention the *historia* of Christ's saving acts outside of the incarnation nor any concept of Old Testament liturgical typology.<sup>11</sup> Rather, in avoiding direct parallels in the Eucharistic liturgy, Dionysius employs a more intellectual symbolism of the ascent from the material to the spiritual world and achieving oneness with God.

This careful understanding of unity with the divine as the achievement of Eucharist is particularly manifested in Dionysius' analysis of the preparatory rites. He describes the procession of the bread and cup to the altar, later called the "Great Entrance," only in brief, functional terms but lingers over the kiss of peace as a manifested result of our "contemplation of and knowledge of the One ... and achiev[ing] a truly divine oneness" (III.3.8) in the *synaxis*. Reciting the names of saints and other dead as the gifts are placed on the altar shows that the deceased participate in the rite and the symbolic oneness, "unshakably bound to [Christ] in a sacred and transcendent union" (III.3.9). Finally, in the hierarch's washing of his hands, he preserves the "utter purity of his conformity to God" (III.3.10), a continued spiritual oneness with the divine reality. All of these rites of preparation lead toward the achievement of the ultimate oneness in the communion of the sacrament itself.

Dionysius only mentions a liturgical parallel with the life of Christ in a discussion of the Incarnation located within what is likely a paraphrase of a Eucharistic prayer in III.3.11.<sup>12</sup>

Dionysius here offers an account of human transgression and Christ's subsequent incarnation but makes no mention of his passion, death, and resurrection. Rather, the grand account of Christ's

---

<sup>11</sup> Dionysius' understanding of literary exegesis focuses on the unity of the Old and New Testament consummated in the one God: "If one considers these texts with a reverent eye one will see something that both brings about unity and manifests a single empathy, of which the source is the spirit of the Deity, ... how the one forecast the divine works of Jesus, while the other described how he actually achieved them. The one wrote truth by way of images, while the other described things as they happened. ... The divine works are the consummation of the divine words" (III.3.5).

<sup>12</sup> Lubheid, 220, n. 95.

incarnation focuses on the unity of God and humanity and the necessity of human imitation of Christ and reception of communion:

[The hierarch] shows how out of love for humanity Christ emerged from the hiddenness of his divinity to take on human shape, to be utterly incarnate among us while yet remaining unmixed. He shows how he came down to us from his own natural unity to our own fragmented level, yet without change, He shows how, inspired by love for us, his kindly activities called the human race to enter participation with himself and to have a share in his own goodness, if we would make ourselves one with his divine life and imitate it as far as we can, so that we may achieve perfection and truly enter into communion with God and with the divine things (III.3.13).

Thus, Eucharist in its symbol of the incarnation emphasizes the spiritual oneness of God and humanity as its goal. The fraction and distribution of Christ in communion, which in Theodore's historical understanding represented Christ's various post-resurrection appearances, first to the women, then to the disciples, and finally other faithful (*Bapt. Comm.* 16.17), in Dionysius' work lead the faithful to a full and complete understanding of God.

By comparison, Theodore certainly recognized the unity achieved through the Eucharist but came to this conclusion through an understanding of the second epiclesis over the people and less immediately through the incarnation at Eucharist: "... by communion in the blessed mysteries we shall be united among ourselves and joined to Christ our Lord, whose body we believe ourselves to be, and through whom we become partakers of the divine nature" (*Bapt. Comm.* 16.13). But in the end, unlike Theodore's homilies, Dionysius' commentary presents little *historia* of the saving life of Christ or one-to-one correspondences recognizing the unity of earthly and heavenly liturgies; instead, he offers a more subtle and pervasive allegory of union with God as represented in the sacrament.

### **III. Maximus the Confessor: Alexandrian Allegory of the Journey of the Soul and Salvation in Christ**

Dionysius clearly influenced the liturgical commentary of Maximus the Confessor (580-662), contained in his work *The Church's Mystagogy*. Writing a handbook for monks stressing

the importance and symbolism of the Eucharistic liturgy,<sup>13</sup> Maximus twice refers his reader to Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. He admits the inferiority of his own work, which contains only "those things which God in his goodness wanted him [Dionysius] to leave for others for their interpretation" (introduction).<sup>14</sup> Like Dionysius, Maximus was writing in the Alexandrian analogical tradition of liturgical commentary, finding in the liturgy "an image of the individual soul's conversion and ascent to union with God."<sup>15</sup> He also found therein an account of salvation history, from the incarnation to the *parousia*, though hardly at the specific level of Theodore's relating the acts of Christ's life and anamnesis of his passion, death and resurrection in symbols. The originality of Maximus' understanding lies in this synthesis of both allegorical and analogical approaches, with liturgy symbolizing the journey of the soul and an account of salvation history less the paschal mystery.<sup>16</sup>

This synthesis notwithstanding, the centerpiece of Maximus' work, chapters eight through 21, describing the liturgy from the entrance of the synaxis to the conclusion of the rite and summary in chapter 24, reads as a point-by-point list of liturgical actions and their respective symbolized meanings. To be fair, in chapters 23 and 24 Maximus imitates a stylistic feature of Dionysius' commentary which set forth the topic of each chapter followed by a "contemplation" that more deeply fleshed out the meaning of each part of the rite.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the bald statements of symbolic representation, without the engagement of anamnestic re-enactment or heavenly participation of Theodore's homilies, present a starker and more didactic allegorical reading of the liturgy.

---

<sup>13</sup> Meyendorff, 36.

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from *The Church's Mystagogy* are taken from a translation by George C. Berthold, *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church," 70.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Berthold, 223, n. 115.

The synthesis of seeing the liturgy as an image of both the historical economy of salvation and of the soul's conversion from sin is shown clearly in Maximus' discussion of the Little Entrance. The entrance of the bishop into the church, described in chapter 2 as an image of the world itself, represents Christ's salvific incarnation: the bishop is a "figure and image of the first appearance in the flesh of Jesus Christ the son of God and our Savior in this world ... [who] ... in exchange for our destructive passions gives us his life-giving Passion as a salutary cure which saves the whole world" (chap. 8). This reference to the passion is as much as Maximus conceives Eucharistic symbolism of the paschal mystery. The bishop's further procession into the sanctuary to the priestly throne represents Christ's ascension into heaven to his heavenly throne. This symbolism reflects a more general (γενικῶς) understanding of liturgy, one that contains the larger scope of salvation history in Christ. The anagogical understanding appears in the more personal or individual (ἰδικῶς) meaning of the people's entrance with the bishop into the church<sup>18</sup>: "the conversion of the unfaithful from faithlessness to faith and from sin and error to the recognition of God as well as the passage of the faithful from vice and ignorance to virtue and knowledge" (chap. 9). A person of sin and vice enters as "with Christ our God and High Priest into virtue, which is the church understood figuratively" (ibid.). Here in this one entrance can be seen the two levels of Maximus' understanding of liturgy.

The personal, anagogical understanding continues in Maximus' explication of symbols of the liturgical readings: "... each one of us receives in proportion to the capacity which is in him" (chap. 10) advice as to how to act in order to be judged worthy in the heavenly kingdom. Similarly, chants inspire spiritual enjoyment, which symbolizes divine blessings that move souls toward love of God and hatred of sin. The Gospel reading, however, is interpreted both individually and generally. On the personal level, it brings about the descent of the Logos to

---

<sup>18</sup> Meyendorff, 36, and Taft, "The Liturgy," p 70-1.

drive away earthly understandings and to direct hearers toward spiritual principles and realities. More generally, the Gospel reading and the subsequent actions of the bishop's descent from the throne, dismissal of catechumens and closing of the doors of the church symbolize the "image and figure" of the second coming (i.e. descent) of Christ, the separation of the faithful from the unfaithful and the passing from the material world into the spiritual world (chaps. 14-15). Here, through the Liturgy of the Word, Maximus depicts the sweep of salvation history from the incarnation to the *parousia*.<sup>19</sup>

Maximus' subsequent chapters on the Eucharist are comparatively slim and omit mention of the anaphora, perhaps, as Schulz suggests, in deference to the commentary of Dionysius and his intention not to repeat what has already been interpreted.<sup>20</sup> The remainder of the liturgy, however, beginning with the Great Entrance symbolizes no longer salvation history *per se* but the coming realities of the *parousia*: The Great Entrance inaugurates the revelation of the mystery of salvation (chap. 16); the kiss of peace prefigures the harmony that comes with the *parousia* and revelation of the "intimate familiarity with the Word of God" (chap. 17); the profession of faith signifies the eternal mystical thanksgiving to God for salvation (chap. 18); the Trisagion shows human equality with the angels and worthiness to sing their hymn of praise in the age to come (chap. 19); the Lord's Prayer indicates both personal adoption by God the Father and the universal sonship of humanity (chap. 20); the *Monogenes* hymn symbolizes the union between all those who enter into salvific holiness and the mystical oneness of the divinity in the spiritual world (chap. 21). As in Dionysius' commentary, Maximus emphasizes these rites of Eucharist as leading to a share in oneness with the divinity in the age to come.

By holy communion of the spotless and life-giving mysteries we are given fellowship and identity with him by participation in likeness, by which man is deemed worthy from man

---

<sup>19</sup> Taft, "The Liturgy," 71.

<sup>20</sup> Schulz, 46.



to become God. For we believe that in this present life we already have a share in these gifts of the Holy Spirit through the love that is in faith, and in the future age after we have kept the commandments to the best of our ability we believe that we shall have a share in them in very truth in their concrete reality ... (chap. 24).

In his understanding of human ability “to become God” and of the soul to become “equal in dignity with the holy angels” (chap. 23), however, Maximus allows the anagogical framework of the liturgy to traverse beyond Dionysius’ distinctions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> More important, his general (γενικῶς) account of salvation history from the incarnation to the parousia, albeit without the detailed stages of the life of Christ as in Theodore’s homilies, also distinguishes his commentary from that of his Alexandrian predecessor.

At the end of this discussion of Maximus’ reading of the liturgy, it is worth explaining what is often meant by the “cosmic” dimension of Maximian liturgy, particularly as it will relate to later commentaries. The cosmic liturgy reflects the more general (γενικῶς) understanding of liturgy and is perhaps best seen in the symbolism of the church building:

The Church is a figure and image of the entire world, composed of visible and invisible essences ... [it is] divided into an area exclusively assigned to priests and ministers, which we call a sanctuary, and one accessible to all the faithful, which we call a nave. Still, it is one in its basic reality without being divided into its parts ... This is like another sort of Church not of human construction which is wisely revealed in this church which is humanly made, and it has for its sanctuary the higher world assigned to the powers above, and for its nave the lower world which is reserved to those who share the life of the sense (chap. 2).

God’s holy church in itself is a symbol of the sensible world as such, since it possesses the divine sanctuary as heaven and beauty of the nave as earth. Likewise, the world is a church since it possesses heaven corresponding to a sanctuary, and for a nave it has the adornment of the earth (chap. 3).

The cosmic understanding of liturgy, in which the church is both a symbol of the world and of the a heavenly sanctuary, draws on Theodore’s notion of concelebration of earthly and heavenly

---

<sup>21</sup> Schulz, 49.

worship.<sup>22</sup> Later, this interpretation is reflected liturgically in the fifth- and sixth-century Introit Hymn and the Cherubikon chant, in which those “who mystically represent the Cherubim” usher in the gifts at the Great Entrance.<sup>23</sup> Maximus consolidates this understanding in his *Mystagogy*, by noting the anagogical purpose within the cosmic and earthly celebrations.

#### **IV. Germanus: The Antiochene Synthesis of the Cosmic Liturgy and the Saving Life of Christ**

Germanus (c. 730), among the clergy attached to the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, infused into this Alexandrian anagogical understanding of “cosmic” liturgy a more Antiochene approach with greater historicizing emphasis on the earthly salvific acts and life of Christ. Even Maximus’ account of salvation history from the incarnation to the *parousia* points more to the heavenly reality to which the liturgy leads the participants, i.e. an anagogical purpose, and does not emphasize Christ’s earthly ministry. Germanus’ approach, as Taft notes, can be seen even in the first word of the title of his work, ἱστορίᾱ, which suggests a more literal and less abstractly symbolic reading of the liturgy.<sup>24</sup> His famous opening statement explaining the meaning of the church building gives a more specific viewpoint into the synthesis of Germanus’ approach:

The church is an earthly heaven in which the supercelestial God dwells and walks about. It represents the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Christ: it is glorified more than the tabernacle of the witness of Moses, in which are the mercy-seat and the Holy of Holies. It is prefigured in the patriarchs, foretold by the prophets, and fulfilled in the martyrs (chap. 1).<sup>25</sup>

Germanus extends and magnifies Maximus’ understanding of the cosmic dimension of the Church: from the beginning of his work Germanus combines the Alexandrian notion of the

---

<sup>22</sup> This link, tracing the evolution of liturgical commentary, is the main thrust of Taft’s article, “The Liturgy of the Great Church.” See note 3.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Taft, *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Taft, “The Liturgy of the Great Church,” 72.

<sup>25</sup> All quotations of Germanus’ *Ecclesiastical History and Mystical Contemplation* are taken from Meyendorff’s translation (see note 1).

present heavenly reality on earth along with an explicit historical representation of the paschal mystery and comparison to Old Testament antecedents.

Locations within the church also correspond to parts of the historical saving life of Christ and/or the heavenly reality: On the one hand, the *simandron*, or sounding board calling the faithful to prayer, represents “the trumpets of the angels and calls the contestants to battle against the invisible enemies” (chap. 2), a heavenly typology. In the next chapter the apse of the church corresponds both to the cave of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem and the cave in which he was buried, neatly encapsulating the duration of Christ’s human life within the building of the church. Other items or locales within the church have dual representation, both heavenly and historical correspondence:

The holy table corresponds to the spot in the tomb where Christ was placed. On it lies the true and heavenly bread, the mystical and unbloody sacrifice. Christ sacrifices His flesh and blood and offers it to the faithful as food for eternal life. The holy table is also the throne of God, on which, borne by the Cherubim, he rested in his body. ... At that table, at his mystical supper, Christ sat among His disciples .... This table was prefigured by the table of the Old Law upon which the manna, which was Christ, descended from heaven (chap. 4).

The altar table is thus each of these—the place of Christ’s earthly repose, an image of sacrifice, the place of God’s heavenly repose, the table of the Last Supper, and a fulfillment of an Old Testament typology of Eucharist. Germanus’ clipped but direct style allows each of these correspondences to co-exist, to hang in the balance, as it were, to recall each type simultaneously. Taft cites critics who condemn Germanus’ overburdening of symbols, as here, perhaps diluting their strength,<sup>26</sup> but the many-layered symbols also create a richness of referents which apply equally and create a strong fabric of a theology of liturgy.

The liturgy proceeds similarly with symbolism both of location within the church and also of the rite. The Great Entrance is another important point of synthesis of manifold symbols

---

<sup>26</sup> Taft, “The Liturgy of the Great Church,” 73.

and of the Antiochene and Alexandrian exegetical traditions. As Theodore describes the deacons as “representations of the invisible ministering powers” (*Bapt. Comm.* 15.25) carrying up the gifts of the offering, so does Germanus note the cosmic scene depicted in the Cherubikon:

By means of the procession of the deacons and the representation of the fans, which are in the likeness of the seraphim, the Cherubic Hymn signifies the entrance of all the saints and righteous ahead of the cherubic powers and the angelic hosts, who run invisibly in advance of the great king, Christ, who is proceeding to the mystical sacrifice, borne aloft by material hands (chap. 37).

The Holy Spirit is present as well, actually “seen” (θεωρούμενον) in the fire, incense and smoke: “for the fire points to His divinity, and the fragrant smoke to His coming invisibly and filling us with good fragrance through the mystical living and unbloody service and sacrifice of burnt-offering” (ibid.). The concluding “Alleluia” to the Cherubikon assents to the anamnesis and salvific effects of the paschal mystery:

In addition, the spiritual powers and the choirs of angels, who have seen His dispensation (οἰκονομία) fulfilled through the cross and death of Christ, the victory over death which has taken place, the descent into hell, and the resurrection on the third day, with us exclaim the alleluia (ibid.)

The Great Entrance also re-enacts the historical events of Christ’s death:

It is also in imitation of the burial of Christ, when Joseph took down the body from the cross, wrapped it in clean linen, anointed it with spices and ointment, carried it with Nicodemus, and placed it in a new tomb hewn out of a rock (ibid.).

This careful liturgical historicizing again recalls Theodore’s re-enacting liturgy, with deacons spreading cloths on the altar as reminders of the burial sheets and beating the air with fans in reverence for the body on the altar, all amid the general silence of an awed and fearful faithful, like the disciples. Germanus, however, takes this historicization to a higher level: his historical representations are both more specific and detailed and also often retain dual representational significance, both historical and more abstract, perhaps even anagogical. Germanus describes even the *discos* on which the body is carried as representing the hands of Joseph and Nicodemus, but it is also rendered as the “sphere of heaven,” manifesting Christ as the spiritual sun (chap.

38). Similarly, the chalice is both the historical vessel that received the mixture poured out from the sides of Christ as well as the image of the “bowl which the Lord depicts, that is, Wisdom” (chap. 39).

Meyendorff concedes that these and other blunt one-to-one correspondences, particularly surrounding the Eucharistic rite, “degenerate into mere allegory” both in their historicizing and abstract connections.<sup>27</sup> Schmemmann similarly criticizes this wholly representational and symbolical understanding of the Eucharist, citing the introduction of the *Proskomedie* into the liturgy for an exclusively symbolic purpose, essentially “‘duplicating’ the Eucharist.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the preparatory rites of the *Proskomedie* take place on a separate altar in the skeuophylakion, which in Germanus’ explanation signifies Calvary, the site of the crucifixion, as well as the burial place of Adam’s skull and a fulfillment of Abraham’s offering first of Isaac and then a ram in his place (chap. 36). Schmemmann’s critique of a “duplicated” Eucharist is realized in Germanus’ symbolic explanation of this preparatory rite and altar, which suggests and symbolizes Christ’s offering even before the full rite of the Eucharist:

Christ, going forth to his crucifixion, took up His cross and offered His own blameless body instead of a ram, as a lamb pierced in the side with a spear. And He became a high priest, offering Himself and [being] offered in order to bear the sins of many (chap. 36).

Schmemmann sees this representational understanding of Eucharist, stemming from the monastic influence of these commentaries, as symptomatic of a larger development of a new liturgical piety regarding the sacrament in which the rite became “an act of self-edification [and] ... an opportunity to receive spiritual succor,”<sup>29</sup> more individually focused.

---

<sup>27</sup> Meyendorff, 46.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Schmemmann. *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 129.

<sup>29</sup> Schmemmann, 141.

Taft, however, takes issue with these negative appraisals of Germanus' work and of symbolic understanding of liturgy in general.<sup>30</sup> He reads in Germanus' straight-forward language a sobriety of symbolic interpretation in synthesizing the traditional interpretation of Dionysius and Maximus and the Antiochene historical understanding of the salvific life of Christ. The sobriety and directness of the text allow the multivalent meanings of the liturgy to speak clearly and in balance: Taft writes, "All levels—Old Testament preparation, Last Supper, accomplishment on Calvary, eternal heavenly offering, present liturgical event—must be held in dynamic unity by any interpretation of the Eucharist."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, after the Great Entrance and the priest's approach of the table, Germanus brings together the historical recollection of Christ's passion and the anagogical approach toward the heavenly mysterious reality:

Thus Christ is crucified, life is buried, the tomb is secured, the stone is sealed. In the company of the angelic powers, the priest approaches, standing no longer on earth, but attending at the heavenly altar, before the altar of the throne of God, and he contemplates the great, ineffable, and unsearchable mystery of God (chap. 41).

The juxtaposition of the historical saving life of Christ and the priest's approach of the heavenly altar is at once a disjunction of time and location, and yet, paradoxically, in its spare description it melds the different events and levels of interpretation within the present reality into a seamless and mysterious unity. This is not to deny the occasional validity of Meyendorff's and Schmemmann's critiques: at times Germanus does indeed rely on detailed, almost itemized one-to-one correspondences between objects and meaning with little unity or further explanation, as noted above. But the richness of the more developed ritual explanations such as those of the altar and the Great Entrance derives from allowing symbolic and metaphorical language to hang in associate tension, neither exclusionary nor definitive in itself.

---

<sup>30</sup> Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church," 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

The balance that Germanus achieves in his work perhaps can be seen as well in Theodore's mystagogy in his baptismal homilies. Although Germanus achieves this later synthesis through the development of the Alexandrian anagogical and cosmic sense of liturgy, Theodore too maintains a balance between theology and teaching, and symbol and salvation history. His exhortative rhetoric in preaching to new initiates relies less on a dogmatic or authoritative approach, but instead on encouraging initiates to build up faith for understanding the rite as something more than its immediate earthly reality, that is, within a historic and heavenly context. It is when representational liturgical commentaries lose this speculative, associative and multi-faceted approach—found particularly in Theodore's and Germanus' works, drawing readers to a deeper appreciation of the rite—and begin to rely on absolute one-to-one correspondences, that representational allegory loses its richness and becomes a simplistic narrative sequence, of the type Taft decries in later medieval commentary as turning “ritual into drama ... [and] mystery into history.”<sup>32</sup>

## **V. Conclusion**

These four eastern liturgical commentaries offer distinct ways of reading the Eucharistic liturgy and its symbolic structures, from Theodore's historical reenactment of the life of Christ and prefiguring of a heavenly kingdom, to Dionysius' anagogical framework leading toward a union with the divine through intellectual symbolism; Maximus' balance of the soul's symbolic journey with the more general account of salvation history in Christ's divine life, and finally Germanus' synthesis of a cosmic liturgy, heaven on earth, with the saving acts of the paschal mystery. The Antiochene tendency toward literal exegesis is apparent in the historical typologies of Theodore and Germanus, while the Alexandrian penchant for allegorical readings suggests the more anagogical bent of Dionysius and Maximus. Yet even Theodore's commentary is an early

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

suggestion that this is a simplistic generalization, for it is his early synthesis of historical re-presentation and heavenly liturgy which Germanus further develops into the dominant eastern theology of the Divine Liturgy until the work of Nicolas Cabasilas in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> But, as Taft himself points out, “*a* theology is not *the* theology, [and one theologian’s] times are not *all* times.”<sup>34</sup> Particularly in the modern west, we tend to look disapprovingly upon allegorical and typological readings of both text and liturgical action as primitive and uncritical exegesis at best and rigid, unambiguous eisegesis at worst. A careful consideration of these eastern commentaries, however, reveals the potential richness of allegory and typology, no longer in common exegetical practice *in se*, but still resonant when allowed to exist in mystery and symbol and not reduced solely to drama or historical narrative. They also allow us to become conscious again of the continued quest for understanding Eucharistic re-presentation and anamnesis, our own participation in the heavenly banquet, and our union with the divine.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 74

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 46.



## Bibliography

- Berthold, George C. *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.
- Luibheid, Colm. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.
- Mazza, Enrico. *Mystagogy*. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989.
- Meyendorff, Paul, trans. and intro. *St. Germanus of Constantinople: On the Divine Liturgy*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.
- Schmemmann, Alexander. *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986.
- Schulz, Hans-Joachim. *The Byzantine Liturgy*. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986.
- Taft, Robert. *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992.
- . "The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm," in *Dunbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 34-35, 1980-81: 45-75.
- Yarnold, Edward. *The Awe-inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century*. Slough, UK: St. Paul Publications, 1971.