

19 May 2014
5:15-8:05 p.m.
Cummings Art Building, Rm. 103
435 Lasuen Mall
Stanford CA 94305
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The Liturgical Commentaries of St. Symeon of Thessalonika (c. 1384-1429) and Late Byzantine Liturgy

I begin this presentation with a couple of relative unknowns. First, I am dealing with St. Symeon, who was archbishop of Thessalonika from 1416/17 to 1429. This is not the much better known St. Symeon the New Theologian, the 10th- and 11th-century saint who, so far as we know, was never a bishop. The better known Symeon the New Theologian was born at Basileion in Galatia in 949 and became a monk of the Monastery of Stoudios in Constantinople, later going to the Monastery of St. Mammars also in Constantinople, where he served as abbot until his exile from the city in 1009. At that time he went to the village Paloukiton, near Chrysopolis on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorous, where he established a monastery dedicated to St. Macrina. He lived there until his death in 1022. His writings deal overwhelmingly with the spiritual life and prayer.

My topic is the much less well known Symeon of Thessalonika, who was born in the city of Constantinople some time around 1384 and eventually entered one of the monasteries there, most likely the Monastery of the Xanthopouloi, where he became a priest-monk. There he enthusiastically took up the Hesychastic theology that marked his works. In 1416/17 he was chosen archbishop of Thessalonika.

His time as archbishop was turbulent. Seemingly shortly after arriving, Symeon sent out a very stern letter to the clergy and people of his new diocese urging obedience and repentance.¹ To a city surrounded by a hostile military force struggling to make do, the tone of this opening letter did not likely endear him the population.

Symeon was also firmly committed as an article of faith to never yielding the city to Ottoman Turks who surrounded it, no matter how desperate the situation might appear. The Ottoman policy was clear and well known: a city that peacefully surrendered was left largely intact, with only minor impositions, but those cities the Ottomans conquered by military force were plundered for three days. From 1387 to 1403 Thessalonika peacefully surrendered to Turkish control and many who remembered that period as being tolerable, if not ideal. The archbishop strenuously resisted any such idea of a negotiated surrender and threatened anyone who made such moves with both ecclesiastical and legal consequences. It does appear than many of Symeon's contemporaries felt that a

¹ *Ἐπιστολὴ πεμφθεῖσα πᾶσι τοῖς ἐν τῇ ἐπισκοπῇ Κίτρονς καὶ ταῖς ἄλλαις κατὰ πᾶσαν τὴν Θεσσαλίαν ἀγίαις ἐπισκοπαῖς εὐσεβέσιν* (Letter sent to all the pious in the diocese of Kitros and in the other dioceses throughout all Thessaly) in David Balfour, *Ἁγίου Συμεῶν ἀρχιεπισκόπου Θεσσαλονίκης (1416/17-1429) Ἔργα Θεολογικά* (Theological Works of St. Symeon, archbishop of Thessalonika, 1416/17-1429), Thessalonika: Πατριαρχον Ἰδρυμα Πατερικῶν Μελετῶν, 1981, pp. 160-170; cf. Balfour, "St. Symeon of Thessalonika: A Polemical Hesychast," *Sobornost/Easter Churches Review* 4:1 (1986) p. 12.

peaceful surrender was the best choice and at times pressed that opinion forcefully.

In 1422 Symeon left the city on the way to Constantinople in order to convince the emperor to send more forces to protect Thessalonika. Just as he was leaving the city, the Sultan Murad II was moving to besiege the city and Symeon narrowly escaped being captured. When he reached Mt. Athos, the monks persuaded Symeon to return. So he returned and from then on, the city as a whole kept a careful watch to make sure that their archbishop did not slip away again.

Clearly it was not an easy time. From Symeon's descriptions, it sounds as if some of his discussions with local leaders turned into virtual shouting matches. In more than one passage he speaks of his weak physical constitution and of being frequently ill. He seems to have been very ill equipped for such a demanding task.

Nonetheless, he somehow found time to write on a wide range of theological topics. Since the city of Thessalonika was under Venetian jurisdiction from 1423, Symeon met Italian Roman Catholics. Living in an era before ecumenical dialogue and inter-denominational understanding, he probably encountered a fairly aggressive version of 15th-century Roman Catholicism. It comes as no surprise then that Symeon's writings strenuously defend Greek Orthodox positions and forcefully condemn what he perceives to be the failings of Roman Catholic theology and practice.

It appears that he died in September 1429. Six months later the city fell to the Turks in a military assault on 29 March 1430. Since Thessalonika followed Symeon's demand that the Turks be resisted, the conquering Ottomans pillaged the city for three days and enslaved most of the surviving population. So it is possible that the area's inhabitants did not remember Symeon with great affection in the years shortly after his death by because of the resistance he demanded and the suffering that followed. This may well be one of the reasons why the Greek Orthodox Church only canonized him in 1981.

Eastern Christians almost always call their eucharistic service "the Divine Liturgy." It has a distinctive shape when celebrated by a bishop, which is termed by a pontifical or hierarchic Divine Liturgy. Symeon wrote an earlier independent work, called *Explanation of the Divine Temple*, most of which is an extensive commentary on the pontifical Divine Liturgy.² There is no clear indication of when it was written, but I am inclined to think that Symeon must have at least begun it while he was still a monk and priest in Constantinople. It has a more orderly structure than his later eucharistic commentary.

Later he wrote his massive *Dialogue in Christ*, which takes up about 70% of the Migne edition of his works.³ Although it does have a very few dialogic elements added here and there, it is mainly a lengthy theological treatise. This enormous

² Steven Hawkes-Teeple (ed. and trans.), *St. Symeon of Thessalonika: The Liturgical Commentaries*, Toronto: Pont. Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011, pp. 79-163.

³ Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiæ cursus completus...*, *Series Græca*, Paris: Imprieries catholiques, 1866, vol. 155, col. 33-636. This is a re-edition of the 1683 edition of J. Molivdos done in Iași, Romania, together with an imperfect Latin translation.

work begins with a general condemnation of heresies, especially those he perceives in the Roman Catholic Church, and then goes on to comment on all the liturgical services of the Byzantine Orthodox Church. This extensive work contains a lengthy section on "On the Sacred Liturgy."⁴ It deals predominantly with the *prothesis*, the ritual preparation of the bread and wine for the Divine Liturgy. This section is certainly later than the commentary because it mentions the earlier *Explanation of the Divine Temple*.⁵ The section, much like the rest of the later book, is a good deal more jumbled than the earlier *Explanation of the Divine Temple*. It jumps back and forth at times, it has a couple of repetitions, and a number of excursus, which leave behind the central argument. Reading this piece alongside the earlier one, I suspect that the later book were the texts dictated by a busy archbishop, finding a free moment here and there to dictate a few additional thoughts to his reflections. It does not appear that it was ever edited to make it more organized or clear and consistent.

When we think of commentaries, we generally refer to books explaining other books. Within the Christian tradition, we have many works of exegesis on parts of the Bible, just as many other world religions have for their sacred books. Although they are similar to such works, Symeon commentaries on the Divine Liturgy are not truly a textual commentary. Liturgies usually depend on written texts, but they are more than the text itself. Symeon's commentaries are mystagogical works dealing with the correct meaning and understanding of both liturgical words and actions.

Mystagogy is not a term that comes up much in contemporary theology or history, but it has a very venerable background. We find reference to such a mystagogical explanation already in Exodus, where we read,

You will observe this as a decree binding you and your children for all time, and when you have entered the country which the Lord will give you, as he promised, you will observe this ritual. And when your children ask you, "What does this ritual mean?" you will tell them, "It is the Passover sacrifice in honor of the Lord who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and struck Egypt, but spared our houses" (Ex 12: 24-27).

This is the very spirit of mystagogy.

In the fourth century after the legalization of Christianity, the Church community experienced a dramatic influx of converts. To cope with this flood of those desiring to join the Christian community, the Church elaborated a catechumenal practice. One its key elements was mystagogy. One of the better known series of such early lectures are the five *Mystagogic Catecheses* of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-387) or his successor, Bishop John II of Jerusalem (c. 356-417), probably in the second half of the fourth century. Slightly later we find a good deal of explanation in the homilies of St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) reflecting the liturgy of both his native Antioch and of Constantinople. Roughly contemporary and a friend of Chrysostom was Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), who also wrote extensively about the meaning and interpretation of the

⁴ Hawkes-Teeples, *Commentaries*, pp. 165-265.

⁵ Hawkes-Teeples, *Commentaries*, L 5.

church rituals. Like Chrysostom's earlier writings, Theodore's commentaries don't reflect precisely the Byzantine liturgy of Constantinople, but the liturgy of Antioch and its surrounding areas. However at this point, the difference between them was relatively small, particularly because the Christian liturgy established by Emperor Constantine in his new capital with its dedication in 330 was clearly Antiochene.

One commentator in particular had an enormous impact on the Byzantine Orthodox and much of the rest of the Eastern Church. This unknown author is today known as Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century) since he claimed to be Dionysius the Areopagite, whom St. Paul met in Acts 17: 34. It is clear from his writings that he cannot possibly have been a figure from the first century since he quotes Neoplatonic writers from later centuries. In addition, the liturgy described by Pseudo-Dionysius is far too evolved to have occurred in the first century. It seems likely that the author was a Syrian of the late fifth or early sixth century, most likely a monastic somewhere in the sphere of influence of Antioch. The first reference to his works by other authors is to be found around 530, so he must have written before that time.⁶

The tradition of commentaries in Byzantine Orthodox world proper begins a little later with *The Church's Mystagogy* by St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662), a brief work of 26 generally brief chapters.⁷ His work is followed a few centuries later by the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of St. Germanus, patriarch of Constantinople (c. 640-740).⁸ Outside the world of Byzantine scholarship, the best known of these commentaries is certainly the *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* by St. Nicholas Cabasilas (c. 1322-c. 1392).⁹ His theological depth and lack of polemics against other Christians makes his commentary quite popular even beyond the sphere of the Byzantine Church.

Obviously in this brief presentation I cannot do a thorough exposition of Byzantine commentaries. That task has already been done by the French Benedictine scholar René Bornert in his still authoritative book on the Byzantine commentaries on the Divine Liturgy.¹⁰ Whatever disagreements one may have and despite the handful of minor errors in the book, it remains the definitive work on the subject.

When he began the work on his *Explanation of the Divine Temple* in the early years of the 15th century, Symeon was acutely aware that he was following in a venerable tradition of commentators. Like all Orthodox theologians of the Middle Ages, Symeon is strongly traditional in his orientation. Consequently, he draws extensively on the earlier commentaries. He mentions Maximus once in the introductory section of the earlier commentary,¹¹ but far and away his

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid et al., New York/Mahway: Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 11-24.

⁷ George C. Berthold, Jaroslav Pelikan, Irénée-Henri Dalmis, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, New York/Mahway: Paulist Press, pp. 183-225.

⁸ Paul Meyendorff (trans., intro., comment.), *St. Germanus of Constantinople: On the Divine Liturgy*, Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.

⁹ Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, trans. J.M. Hussey and P.A. McNulty, intro. R.M. French, London: S.P.C.K., 1960; Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1970.

¹⁰ René Bornert, *Les Commentaires byzantins de la Divine Liturgie du VII^e au XV^e siècle*, Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1966.

¹¹ Hawkes-Teeple, *Commentaries*, E 14.

favorite authority is certainly Pseudo-Dionysius. In the two commentaries on the Divine Liturgy, Symeon quotes Dionysius by name eight times directly and refers to his commentaries indirectly many other times.¹² What Symeon could not have known is that his works would be the conclusion of the tradition of liturgical commentaries in the Byzantine Empire. Symeon died in 1429 and 24 years later Constantinople, the last island of the Byzantine Roman Empire would fall.

Because Symeon and other later writers accepted the claim that Pseudo-Dionysius was a companion of St. Paul, the writings of this unknown author had a dramatic influence on medieval Christian writers in both East and West. If he were seen as a companion of St. Paul, how could Pseudo-Dionysius not be authoritative? His *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* contains a substantial commentary on the Church's liturgical services.¹³

One illustration will clarify Symeon's profound devotion to Pseudo-Dionysius. In both the commentaries, Symeon draws on Pseudo-Dionysius' triads to explain the meaning of the major liturgical ministers.¹⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius describes the three orders thus:

Συνῆκται τοίνυν ἡμῖν, ὡς αἱ μὲν ἅγιαί τελεταὶ κάθαρσις εἰσι καὶ φωτισμὸς καὶ τελείωσις, οἱ δὲ λειτουργοὶ καθαρτικὴ τάξις, οἱ δὲ ἱερεῖς φωτιστικὴ, τελεστικὴ δὲ οἱ θεοειδεῖς ἱεράρχαι....¹⁵

We must now sum up. The holy sacraments bring about purification, illumination, and perfection. The deacons (*leitourgoi*) form the order which purifies. The priests constitute the order which gives illumination. And the hierarchs, living in conformity with God, make up the order which perfects.¹⁶

Not having the work of the earlier author at hand, Symeon most likely worked from memory in writing his own commentaries. Not surprisingly, he made a mistake getting the priests who bring illumination and the bishops who bring things to perfection confused. Rather, Symeon has *enlightening* bishops and *perfecting* priests. This is the reading found in all the printed editions until mine in 2011. One late text, Manuscript Zagora 23, has what are almost certainly Symeon's autograph emendations in both commentaries squeezed in between the lines. There he painstakingly corrects the errors and modifies the theological commentary to fit the corrected Dionysian terms. The error is not remarkable. However it is interesting that, in all turbulence of his later years as archbishop, Symeon having discovered his error went back to the text and added corrections to this one manuscript. Clearly Pseudo-Dionysius was important and getting his thought down accurately was worth the trouble.

¹² Cf. Hawkes-Teeples, *Commentaries*, E 12, E 70, L 2, L 5-6, L 16, L 112, L 152.

¹³ *Περὶ τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας* (On the ecclesiastical hierarchy) in Günter Heil (ed.), *Corpus Dionysiacum II* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2012, 2nd Ed.). Cf. Jean Leclercq, "Influence and Noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages," and Karlfried Froehlich, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century," in *Complete Works* pp. 25-32 and pp. 33-46.

¹⁴ Hawkes-Teeples, *Commentaries*, E 27-29, L 16, 28.

¹⁵ Heil, *Corpus Dionysiacum II*, p. 119 (PG 3: 536D).

¹⁶ Pseudo-Dionysios, *The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibhéid (New York, 1987) 248.

The empire collapsed in 1453, but the vibrancy and genius of the Byzantine Roman Empire outlasted the empire itself, in what has been termed “Byzance après Byzance.”¹⁷ Symeon’s mystagogy has almost certainly had a wider impact on Russian Orthodoxy than it did on Greek Orthodoxy because of the commentary written by Archbishop Veniamin (Krasnopevkov-Rumovskij, 1739-1811) of Nizhnij Novgorod and Arzamas. In 1803 the archbishop published *Новая Скрижаль или объяснение о церкви, о литургии, и о всех службах и утварях церковных* (*The New Tablet or an Explanation of the Church, of the Liturgy, and of All Church Services and Utensils*), which draws extensively on Symeon, sometimes simply translating him into Russian. This book is extremely popular in Orthodox circles in Russia down to the present time; its 18th edition appeared in 1999. This work was brought to my attention a number of years ago by an international circle of Russian Orthodox seminarians. For many of them Bishop Veniamin’s commentary was the final word on the theology of the eucharist and meaning of the Divine Liturgy.

Symeon, however, actually goes beyond the strict limits of commentary and develops his commentaries in a prescriptive line. As the liturgy developed in the Middle Ages, especially the burgeoning of the preparatory rites of the *προόθεσις* after the year 1100, there emerged prescriptive texts called *διάταξις*, to describe how liturgical actions should be done. The best known of these was written Philotheos Kokkinos (c. 1300-1379) and much of its content found its way eventually into the modern liturgical texts as rubrics in books such as the Greek *ἱερατικά* and the Slavic *служебники*. The parts of Symeon’s commentaries that have a clearly ‘diataxal’ quality carry on the tradition of Kokkinos and others.

These commentaries pose a very interesting and difficult question when we read them as sources. Did the commentaries noticeably change or develop the liturgy in a particular direction? It is essentially a version of the old riddle about which came first the chicken or the egg. Obviously, our medieval liturgical texts have no footnotes as to what came from where. What we know about the development of the liturgy generally points to a number of social and ecclesiastical currents, rather than to the commentaries themselves as sources of the change.

For instance, one part of the liturgy which has experienced the most dramatic growth is the Great Entrance. In the earlier period, as witnessed in the writings of Chrysostom, the deacons took the censer, went out to the skeuophylakion, and brought the eucharistic gifts into the church quietly. The skeuophylakion was a small, round separate building near the northeast corner of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia. There was no accompanying chant and it does not appear that this was a formal procession, simply a functional going and coming. It appears that at this time the deacons probably prepared the chalice in the skeuophylakion, mixing wine and warm water, so that the chalice would be warm at communion time. Undoubtedly, they brought the censer with them because they incensed the gifts in the skeuophylakion.

Out of this simple, rather straightforward and functional preparation of the chalice and transfer of the prepared gifts to the altar, there evolved one of the

¹⁷ Cf. Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance: continuation de l’ “Histoire de la vie byzantine,”* Bucharest: Institut d’études byzantines, 1935; Bucharest, 1971.

most ritually complex moments of the contemporary Byzantine liturgy. It has evolved its own chants, its own prayers, four incensations and now involves everyone serving in the liturgy. It is particularly striking because today the physical displacement of the eucharistic gifts from the preparation table to the main altar — both within the sanctuary area behind the iconostasis — is frequently less than 20 feet. However the Great Entrance procession takes the gifts out into the nave of the church in procession through one of the side doors and then brings them back solemnly through the large central holy doors into the sanctuary. Clearly, functionality is not the key motive here.

Although I don't think that we can lay this development entirely at the feet of the commentaries, the Byzantine liturgy developed a very strong current of interpretation, understanding the successive stages of the Divine Liturgy to be representations of the life of Christ. Although we find a bit of this approach in Maximus' commentary in the seventh century, it really takes off in Germanus' commentary a century later. By the time of Symeon in the fifteenth century, the events of the life of Christ become clearly the principal interpretive key to the Divine Liturgy. Within this framework, in many commentaries the Great Entrance comes to be seen as the funeral procession of Jesus after his crucifixion.

In the fifth century Theodore, a friend of St. John Chrysostom, bishop of the city of Mopsuestia about 12 miles east of ancient Antioch, wrote extensively about the Divine Liturgy and its meaning. The liturgy he was celebrating was not the Byzantine liturgy, but the Antiochene liturgy of his fellow Syrian, Pseudo-Dionysius. In Theodore's homilies he spoke with great reverence of the transfer of the gifts to the altar as the funeral procession of the Lord. Theodore insisted that this procession must be carried out in total silence, as a sign of the great respect due the Crucified King. As far as we can tell, this was an innovation on Theodore's part. This occurred many centuries before most of the Byzantine developments of the elaborate Great Entrance ritual.

Is it possible that Theodore's mystagogical homilies contributed to the ritual splendor of the Byzantine Great Entrance? It is possible, but rather unlikely. In the sixth century, Theodore's theology was condemned by the emperor and by church officials in the Controversy of the Three Chapters. From that point onward, no one in the Chalcedonian Churches would have consciously used his ideas. Indeed from that point, what we have of Theodore's writing survived either as texts mistakenly attributed to other authors or in Syriac translations preserved by non-Chalcedonians. So, while it is possible that Theodore's ideas might have influenced the Byzantine liturgy somehow indirectly, I tend to doubt it.

Much of the elaborate ritual of the Great Entrance seems to have grown up in what Fr. Robert Taft, SJ has called a liturgical *soft point*. This is a point when the clergy have something to do at the altar while the laity has nothing to do. In such moments, very frequently the choir and laity began singing one or more psalms with a refrain appropriate for the occasion. Such appears to be the rise of the Cherubic Hymn sung during most celebrations of the Divine Liturgy, and also of the special refrains used on Holy Thursday, Holy Saturday, and in the Lenten Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. When I refer to the Cherubic Hymn as psalmody, I may startle a modern observer who knows contemporary Byzantine worship. Such a person might well object, "But there is no psalm in the chant of

the Cherubic Hymn.” Indeed, there is none today, but it is now reasonably clear that it once was a Byzantine antiphonal psalm.

On a humorous personal note, Symeon notes one usage that this priest is very relieved no longer figures in current usage. The earlier commentary refers to the practice of the faithful prostrating themselves before the priest carrying the bread and wine for the eucharist in the Great Entrance (E 65). The priest then steps over the prostrate faithful, the passage of the priest and the eucharistic gifts being a blessing for them. Being an older priest who finds getting up and down the sanctuary steps with his hands full to be challenge enough, I am very happy that I do not have to step over my congregants and risk falling on them!

For the most part, Symeon’s liturgy is very close to the contemporary Divine Liturgy of Orthodox and Byzantine Catholic Christians around the world today. There are only a handful of usages that Symeon describes that would be unfamiliar to people active in these Churches today. The most notable was that, after vesting in the nave, the bishop went to the main door of the cathedral and remained there. This was termed the “Descent to the West.” There the bishop waited for the rest of the clergy to join him as they began the Little Entrance, the First Procession with the Gospel.

Thus, in most cases the liturgy affected the commentators far more than the other way around. Obviously those discussing the meaning of the liturgy need to deal with the reality at hand. That is obviously the task of any commentary or explanation. What should be there in the celebration or might be there in the celebration may be a connected question, but is not the central topic being explored.

If the influence of the commentaries on the actual celebration of the liturgy is not terribly direct, a much more clear connection can be seen between the commentaries and the way the liturgy was understood. Yet our principal problem here is to determine when the commentaries impacted the Church’s understanding of the Divine Liturgy and when things worked the other way around. In the end, this question must remain largely unanswered. We have the written documents that speak of how authors saw the services, but how the rest of the Church, which left no writings felt is much harder, nearly impossible, to judge.

Let us turn more directly to Symeon of Thessalonika and his commentaries. What were some of the points he pressed more forcefully?

Perhaps the first point we might refer to is Symeon’s heavy dependence on tradition and what he understood of tradition. Historical questions here are key, but one must remember the era in which Symeon lived and what history was available to him. It is all well and good for us in the 21st century to state that Pseudo-Dionysius obviously could not possibly have been the first-century companion of St. Paul. We can draw on a vast array of modern scholarship starting in the European Renaissance that shows that point quite clearly. In the fifteenth century Symeon had no way of knowing clearly that Pseudo-Dionysius was not Dionysius the Areopagite of the Acts of the Apostles.

Next, if one presupposes that the church services described in Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* are precise descriptions of first-century liturgy, then

making sense of the genuine history of Christian liturgy would become nearly impossible. This supposedly primitive text presents a very evolved and ritually sophisticated liturgy. Other writings from the third and fourth century show much more rudimentary celebrations. How would one put all of this together in a coherent pattern?

Given his convictions that the oldest usages are the truest and most Orthodox, Symeon is to set out these most ancient and most reliable practices. In the opening section of *Explanation of the Divine Temple*, he writes,

Οὐδὲ γὰρ τῶν παραδεδομένων καινότερον ἄλλο παρ' ἡμῖν, οὐδ' ἂν παρελάβομεν ἠλλοιώσαμεν, τετηρήκαμεν δέ, ὡς καὶ τὸ τῆς πίστεως σύμβολον· ὅθεν ὡς παρ' αὐτοῦ τοῦ Σωτῆρος καὶ τῶν ἀποστόλων ἐδόθη καὶ τῶν πατέρων, οὕτω τὴν ἱερουργίαν τελοῦμεν· καὶ ὡς μὲν ὁ Κύριος ἱερουργῆσε μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν ὧν, καὶ τὸν ἄρτον κλάσας καὶ αὐτοῖς μεταδοὺς καὶ τὸ ποτήριον, ὁμοίως καὶ ἡ ἐκκλησία ποιεῖ, τοῦ ἱεράρχου μετὰ τῶν ἱερέων ἱερουργοῦντος, καὶ πᾶσι μεταδιδόντος, ἢ καὶ ἱερέως μετὰ λοιπῶν.

Τοῦτο δὲ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἀποστόλων μαρτυρεῖ διάδοχος, ὁ ἱερός φημι Διονύσιος, οὕτω διδάσκων ἱερουργεῖν ὡς ἡμεῖς. καὶ οἱ θεηγόροι δὲ Βασίλειος καὶ Χρυσόστομος, τὴν τῆς μυσταγωγίας πλατύτερον ἐκθέμενοι τάξιν, οὕτω παραδεδώκασιν ἐνεργεῖν ὡς ἡ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐκκλησία· καὶ μαρτυροῦσιν αὐτῶν αἱ εἰς τὴν ἱερουργίαν εὐχαί, τὴν πρώτην τε καὶ δευτέραν εἴσοδον ἐκδιδάσκουσαι, καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῆς ἱεραῆς τελετῆς.

For we propose nothing newer than what is handed down by tradition, nor have we changed what we received; rather, we have preserved it like the profession of faith. Therefore, as handed down by the Savior Himself, by the apostles and by the fathers, so also we accomplish the sacred-service. As the Lord celebrated the sacred-service with the disciples, breaking the bread, giving it to them along with the chalice, so the Church also does, when the hierarch celebrates the sacred-service with the priests, and distributes it to all, or a priest with others.

The successor of the apostles, the sacred Dionysios, testifies to this, teaching that the services be celebrated as we do. The God-inspired Basil and Chrysostom, having set forth the order of the mystagogy more fully, have handed down that it should be carried out as our Church does. Their prayers for the sacred-service bear witness, expounding on the first and second entrances and the rest of the sacred rite.¹⁸

From the perspective of what we know about liturgy today, Symeon's assertions here are more than a bit breath-taking. He suggests that there is relatively little change between the Last Supper of Jesus and his inner circle of disciples, the texts of Basil and John Chrysostom, and the pontifical Divine Liturgy he knew with many ministers and assistants. Today we would find this hard to take seriously. Certainly our contemporary Divine Liturgy finds its origins in that first-century meal of our Lord, God, and Savior with his followers, but it takes several very large steps to get from there to 15th-century Thessalonika.

The one liturgical change that Symeon knows of and of which he approves is the custom of receiving communion by a spoon. He is aware that in times past

¹⁸ Hawkes-Teeple, *Liturgical Commentaries* E 11-12.

everyone received first the bread in their hands and then drank from the chalice, but this custom has changed *διὰ τινὰ ἐπιγεγονότα* (“because of some incidents”).¹⁹

The segment of the modern liturgy which developed last chronologically is ironically that which is carried out first in contemporary usage. It has often been called the *προσκομιδὴ* or *проскомидия*. Both terms mean “offering” and are subject to considerable misunderstanding, due to the way the term is used elsewhere in the Divine Liturgy. In scholarly and technical discussions today the term *πρόθεσις* (prothesis) is preferred. During this ritual a roughly square portion is cut out of a small round loaf. The square portion is the Lamb, the central bread to be consecrated in the Divine Liturgy. In Symeon’s usage and that of present-day churches, a number of other smaller pieces of bread are cut out and placed on the plate next to the Lamb. There are ten commemorations for the saints and an unspecified number for the living and the deceased. Finally, the gifts are covered and incensed, and a concluding prayer for the preparatory ritual is said. With exception of the concluding prayer, which is far older than the rest of the ritual, the prothesis began to develop in the 11th century.

It certainly appears that in its earliest pre-Byzantine state putting some bread on a plate and pouring some wine into a cup were most likely seen as purely practical functions to be performed by anyone, regardless of rank. These would have been like opening the door or lighting a candle to be able to see, something done by whoever happened to arrive first, regardless of his or her ecclesiastical rank. In the early Byzantine period, it had become a function of the deacons, who accepted the offerings in the *skeuophylakion* and then chose which bread and wine to use. A bishop or priest would have come by and said our concluding prayer in the *skeuophylakion* on his way into the cathedral. It is worth noting that although our present ritual involves a preparation of both the bread and the wine, the concluding prayer still in use mentions only the bread. That feature most likely indicates that it originated at a point when the chalice was prepared with hot water shortly before being brought into the church.

In the middle Byzantine period after the turn of the millennium the preparation of the gifts became more formal and ritualized. With this development, it became more sacerdotalized and considered to be a priestly function, in which deacons only assisted in a secondary role. Symeon comes on the scene toward the end of this process. He notes with considerable disapproval that prior to his arrival deacons were performing the prothesis in Thessalonika. He also comments that on Mt. Athos in the venerable monastic republic there were still monasteries where deacons were allowed to perform the prothesis ritual without the ministry of a priest (L 116).

Symeon then goes on to say that preparing the gifts is clearly and plainly a priestly function. Thus obviously the tradition of the Church from ancient times on has always been that priests perform the prothesis. Allowing deacons to do this is certainly a later corruption of pristine practice of the Fathers and of the ancient Church. Here Symeon is wrong. In fact, the developments were so close to his time that it is hard to understand how he did not know otherwise.

¹⁹ Hawkes-Teeple, *Liturgical Commentaries* L 95

Thus one might be inclined to conclude that Symeon's writings influenced the liturgy in its subsequent development. In contemporary usage a bishop or a priest always does the ritual with a deacon assisting if possible. However I fear that we might be giving Symeon too much credit here. The increasing priestly character of the prothesis started long before Symeon and it was moving the liturgy in an unmistakable direction of greater ritualization and more emphasis on the priest and his role. On this point, the history would have probably have been quite the same even if Symeon had never written a word about the liturgy.

It is clear that Symeon was very concerned about the roles the in liturgy. He wanted to make sure that priests, deacons, readers, and lay people carried out their appointed liturgical roles and *only* their own appointed roles. The tem for this in Symeon's Greek vocabulary would be ὑποταγή or subordination. The word only occurs once in these commentaries (L 25), but Symeon frequently speaks in other words of maintaining the appropriate order in church services. Among other passages, Symeon's lengthy discussion of the order of those coming forward for communion can seem to a contemporary reader a bit excessive (L 139-155). Unfortunately Symeon does not tell us exactly what problems he encountered leading to this discussion, so we cannot judge how appropriate or otherwise his reaction may have been.

There are, however, definitely two liturgical usages for which Symeon argued strenuously, and those two did not endure: the ancient sung cathedral office and the bishop serving without a miter.

In the early centuries of the Christian Church, the dominant daily structure public liturgical prayer were matins or morning prayer, vespers or evening prayer, and other services through the day and night, usually called the Liturgy of the Hours. The eucharist as a part of the daily cycle of services arrived relatively late. In the setting of the cities, towns, and villages there evolved different styles of matins and vespers, frequently shorter in length and sometimes with a good deal more music. These are called *the cathedral liturgy* since the services developed in the great cathedrals and then were spread to other urban and semi-urban churches.

On the other hand, in the monastic setting, where celibates led lives wholly centered on the praise of God, there developed a different structure of the hours, generally longer, with much more recited psalmody, and sometimes with less music. For obvious reasons, this is called *the monastic liturgy*. One of the principal tasks of monastic novices was learning by heart the 150 psalms so that they could be chanted responsorially in the monastic liturgy.

In Hagia Sophia and the other great secular churches of Constantinople there developed a cathedral liturgy, which is know technically as the ἀκολουθία ἀσματική and we can translate that roughly as the "Sung Office." These beautiful services were rather complex and demanded trained cantors and a choir to execute them. During the great periods of Constantinople's splendor, there was no difficulty in finding the needed people to carry out these services. Unfortunately, in the chaos surrounding and after the disaster of the Frankish occupation from 1204 to 1261, it was simply no longer possible to continue these elaborate liturgies. A simpler, largely monastic office took their place in Hagia Sophia and other churches of the capital.

However, surprisingly the old solemn Sung Office did continue to be celebrated in Thessalonika. Symeon seems to have loved it and even composed some hymns to be used in it.²⁰ There is a lengthy section of Symeon's *Dialogue in Christ*, in which he discusses the older office.²¹ As the chaos of the Frankish occupation doomed the Sung Office in Constantinople, so the destruction of Turkish conquest of Thessalonika months after Symeon's death sadly finished it off in this city as well.

In the earlier commentary, the archbishop tells us that "All the priests and hierarchs of the East, except the hierarch of Alexandria, perform the Divine Liturgy with the head uncovered" (E 41). Because St. Paul writes that Christ is our head (cf. Eph 5:23 and Col 1:18, 2:10) and we are his limbs (cf. 1 Cor 6:15), it is necessary for those honoring Christ to have heads uncovered when they pray. Furthermore, the book of the Gospel is imposed on the bishop's head at his ordination and no head covering could possibly be more worthy than the Gospel. Even those who use the miter recognize that it is of limited value since they remove it at more solemn moments of the Divine Liturgy. He accepts that the use of a bishop's miter is an ancient custom, so this is not just some recent abuse. For Symeon, the worst terms for reprehensible practices are the various Greek terms built on the root *καινο-* and *καινοτομ-*, meaning "innovation" (E 90 and L 57). The use of the miter is acceptable because it is ancient. Indeed it can be found in the Old Testament, which is a negative point for Symeon. The age is an advantage, but Jewish usages are part of the Law, as opposed to the far superior Christian customs of the Grace. So the miter is tolerable, but as Symeon writes, "So, then, it is more suitable to pray and to do the Divine Liturgy with the head uncovered and one must not neglect this especially in the solemn moments" (E 42).

Anyone who has been around Byzantine Orthodox or Byzantine Catholic bishops recently knows that at present they certainly do wear miters. They do remove them at more solemn moments, as Symeon requires, but they certainly do wear them. So this is another point that the archbishop clearly lost.

So what would we say about the influence of Symeon on the celebration of the liturgy? In terms of the actual execution of the services, I think that we would have to conclude that Symeon's impact was negligible. It certainly is something of which the archbishop himself would be proud. We quoted above his assertion that the liturgy is carried out exactly as it has been.

For the most part, Symeon's great value to the contemporary historian is that of a witness. He tells us a great deal about what he saw and knew. Many of his observations are quite interesting. We already mentioned the archbishop's descent to the west after vesting for the Divine Liturgy and waiting at the main door of the nave for the rest of clergy to join him for the Little Entrance (E 43, L

²⁰ Συμειῶν ἀρχιεπισκόπου Θεσσαλονίκης τὰ λειτουργικὰ συγγράμματα, 1. Εὐχαὶ καὶ ὕμνοι (*The Liturgical Compositions of Symeon, Archbishop of Thessalonika, 1. Prayers and Hymns*); Σειρὰ φιλολογικὴ καὶ θεολογικὴ 10. Thessalonika: Ἐταιρεία Μακεδονικῶν Σπουδῶν, 1968.

²¹ Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* vol 155: 536-669; Eng. trans. *Treatise on Prayer: An Explanation of the Services Conducted in the Orthodox Church by Symeon of Thessalonike* by H.L.N. Simmons of "Περὶ τῆς θείας προσευχῆς" ("On Divine Prayer"). Archbishop Iakovos Library of Ecclesiastical and Pastoral Sources 9. Brookline, MA 1984.

23-24, 120). This is obviously a ritual relic from the entrance of the whole community into church at once, as in the primitive liturgy in Constantinople.²²

Another quite interesting observation is Symeon's remark that the Roman Catholics blow on the gifts during the prayer consecrating them. In Symeon's Thessalonika there were Venetian troops and presumably Venetian priests with them. As in other Romance languages the H is unpronounced. At that time Roman Catholics believed that every letter of the words of institution in Latin had to be audibly pronounced for the gifts to be validly consecrated. Consequently, Italians and others blew on the gifts to provide the H of "Hoc est enim corpus meum" ("This then is my body") and "Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei" ("This is the chalice of my blood"). Regardless of how much he may have disapproved of the Roman Catholics, it seems that he did indeed attend at least one Roman mass, apparently with someone who understood enough Latin to indicate what was taking place.

Still, Symeon's impact reaches beyond his historical remarks. In his commentaries he pulled together the tradition of commentaries that had been developing in the Byzantine world since Maximus the Confessor. Symeon's style of commentary has been characterized as an *Aristotelian* drama, as opposed to a more *Platonic* contemplation of the heavenly realities.²³ The archbishop had little interest in philosophy as such, so I am skeptical about attributing to him philosophical positions he would not have recognized. I prefer a more straightforward term, *iconic*.

In Symeon's view, the entire liturgy was a symbolic re-presentation of the life of Christ. I think that he would concede that sometimes elements are chronologically misplaced, but the theological symbolism of each element remains the key element. It is as if every person, object, and action in the liturgy were an *icon* of some moment or aspect of Christ's life. The priest emerging from the sanctuary area with the Gospel book at the beginning of the Little Entrance is Christ going out to preach. The procession with the bread and wine at the Great Entrance is Christ's funeral procession.

On one level, this is a genial system. It is relatively simple. It has many, many elements. If one forgets a few of the elements, it is not a tragic loss because there are so many others. As we said, here and there we have a few chronological displacements, but on the whole the basic structure stands. In the preparatory rites usually performed quietly before the opening blessing, this system sees the infancy of Christ. Not surprisingly some of the actions in the preparatory rites have had infancy symbolisms attached to them, such as the asterisk, a frame placed over the bread pieces, keeping the veils from moving them. The asterisk has a star hanging from it in memory of the star of Bethlehem. In Slavic usage as the priest or bishop places the asterisk over the bread, he says, "The star came and stood over the place where the child was" (Mat 2:9).

Although the asterisk is a relatively late — 11th century — addition to the ritual, this framework of the seeing the life of Christ in actions of the liturgy was

²² Juan Mateos, *La célébration de la parole dans la liturgie byzantine. Étude historique. Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 191 (1971), 71-90.

²³ Hans-Joachim Schulz, *The Byzantine Liturgy (Die byzantinische Liturgie)*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell. Pueblo: New York, 1986, 25-28 43-49.

developing for centuries. We can see clear signs of it already in Germanus' commentary in the eighth century. Consequently, it is by no means something that Symeon invented in the 14th century. Symeon's principal contribution was that he pulled together elements of the various strands of Byzantine mystagogy into a single, more or less unified, whole.

Especially because of the considerable impact of *The New Tablet* by Bishop Veniamin in Russian, this system of interpreting the liturgy became one of the principal means of interpreting liturgy in the Orthodox world. The Russian writer Nikolaj Gogol in his posthumous *Размышления о Божественной Литургии* (Meditations of the Divine Liturgy) draws on both Symeon directly and via Bishop Veniamin. Gogol's work has been criticized for drawing too heavily on Western theology and spirituality, so its influence on Orthodox theology is mixed.²⁴ However his impact on popular spirituality has been overwhelming.

Thus Symeon's impact on liturgy is not to be found principally in the specific actions or services of the Byzantine Christians, whether Orthodox or Byzantine Catholic. His effort to preserve the older Sung Office and to prevent bishops from using the miter clearly failed. Although Symeon certainly did not by any means invent the allegorical, iconic mystagogy that characterizes his works, his commentaries do form the most the extensive liturgical explanation of this type up to his time. He pulled it all together, synthesized, and passed it on to posterity. In many ways, this style of liturgical theology is still one of the dominant currents in contemporary Eastern theology. For instance, a Greek Orthodox professor teaching at the Byzantine Catholic seminary in Pittsburgh has used the edition of Symeon's two commentaries on the Divine Liturgy as a basic textbook on the Byzantine eucharist.

Having said all of this, I would like to point out an important weakness here. When we tie everything in the Divine Liturgy to actions in Christ's earthly life, we can risk losing a central aspect of the service. The liturgy is — and absolutely must be! — more than a spectacle reminding us of Christ's life and actions. It needs to be our loving service to the Φιλάνθρωπος, the Человѣколюбец, the loving God who creates us, saves us, and leads us to fullness of eternal life in his kingdom. God calls us, you and me and all humanity, here and now to love and serve him in this glorious, tragic, and confusing world. With the heavy emphasis on everything in the liturgy being an icon, an image of past historic events, our piety runs the risk of missing the important present and future message of the Christian faith. God has been present and active in the past, but more importantly the loving God is active here and now and promises to be there in the future.

There is yet another significant problem of an understanding of the liturgy that focuses on the separate elements. It can lose sight of the overall coherence of the whole service. While there is certainly no harm in seeing the Little Entrance as symbolic of Christ going forth to preach the kingdom of God, it is very important that we in this action welcome the word of God in our midst today and prepare to listen attentively to God's message for us where we are right now. The one liturgical action points to others, which follow. The Divine Liturgy has an

²⁴ Cf. Ioann Nefjodov, "Размышления о Божественной Литургии Н.В. Гоголя: Церковно-практический комментарий к одному из самых читаемых произведений классика." *Журнал московской патриархии* May 2010, 84-87

internal coherence and unity. We need to see how the individual parts fit into the whole.

My notion, my suggestion would be that we in Byzantine Churches build a new liturgical understanding. This mystagogy would include what is sound and valuable in the classic Byzantine allegorical or iconic explanation. We would take what Symeon and others have given us and build on it. I think that we see signs of this emerging here and there. One of the more engaging examples of this can be found in the short weekly episodes of *Coffee with Sister Vassa* on YouTube and Ancient Faith Radio. This is certainly not high theology and some people object to its humorous aspects. In many ways, it is very different from the serious scholarly work that Sr. Dr. Vassa Larin does in her formal academic studies. Nonetheless, it has engaged a certain audience and given them a new vision of the liturgy and its meaning for us today.