

The Mystery of Faith

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Many people find it a stumbling block that we believe that the bread and wine of Holy Communion is truly our Lord's Body and Blood and not just figuratively so. But when we think of our Lord's Birth we meet the same Mystery.

The Orthodox Church prefers the word Mystery to designate the rites or sacraments such as Baptism, the Eucharist (Lord's Supper), Anointing the Sick, etc. In the Orthodox Church their number is not limited to seven. In reality there is only one Mystery: "God is the Lord and hath revealed Himself to us" (Psalm 118:27). The word 'Mystery' here does not refer to something concealed, but rather to the revelation of something which cannot be described or explained. The one Mystery is that God, Who in Himself cannot be known, seen or described, reveals Himself to humans. This self-revelation occurs through His eternal Son and Word. He reveals Himself most perfectly and definitively in the Incarnation of Christ, in His Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension. 'For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily' (Col. 2:9). Yet Christ appears no different from any other man. (He is mentioned as appearing different only at one moment: the Transfiguration.) He eats and drinks, grows tired and thirsty, and dies. Most people say, 'Isn't this the carpenter's son?' Only with the eyes of faith do people say, 'Truly this was the Son of God.'

This revelation in Christ is not limited to His earthly Life, but continues in His Church, 'which is His Body, the fullness of Him who filleth all in all' (Eph. 1:23). The Church is spoken of as holy, as His mystical Bride (Eph. 5, Rev. 21), the 'pillar and ground of Truth' (1 Tim. 3:15). In the Mystery of Baptism each member of the Church is 'born anew of water and spirit' (John 3:5). But they are not physically changed. Like Jesus Himself, the members of the Church do not look any different from other people. Yet the apostle speaks of them as the holy ones ('saints') at Corinth or wherever, even when he is pointing out their faults. The perception of the Church as holy, the perception of the baptized as sons of God, is with the eyes of faith.

The same can be said of the Eucharist, which is also an extension of God's revelation of Himself in Christ. He describes Himself as the Bread of Life which came down from heaven, of which the manna given in the wilderness was a foreshadowing. 'If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.' He uses strongly physical language to express this: 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.' (John 6) Unless our Lord is advocating cannibalism, can this language make any sense unless it refers to the Eucharist? It surely does not suggest merely a figurative or 'symbolic' relationship to His Body.

But as with our Lord's earthly Body, and as with the Church, these Mysteries cannot be discerned by sight. The Eucharistic Bread does not look any different after it is offered. It is not physically changed. It does not cease to be bread.

In our Lord's Incarnation, in His Church, and in the Eucharist we meet the same Mystery, that the unseen indescribable God takes 'flesh', this physical world, human life, into union with Himself. We must insist that this is a real union. We must say that Christ Himself is both truly God and truly man. If we try to explain away this paradox and say He is only a godlike man or maybe God appearing to be a man, we no longer have the Saviour, the 'one mediator between God and Man' (1 Tim. 2:5) which is the central Mystery of our faith. If we say that the Church is not really the Body of Christ but that this is only an analogy, then Christ's Body is no longer present in the world and we have no possibility of 'really' being transformed and made holy by the Spirit. If we say that the Eucharistic bread and wine are not really the Body and Blood of Christ, but only 'reminders' of it, are only so because we believe them to be so, then this Mystery of the union of earth and heaven is only in our imagination, and we do not really 'eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of His blood,' so we 'have no life' in us.