

The *Diakonia* of Liturgy: Diakonia as Philanthropia

Teva Regule

I would like to begin with a question: What is liturgy? I do not ask this rhetorically, but in the hope that we can begin to think more deeply about the question. As many of us know, the word *leitourgia* comes from *leitōs* (which is derived from *leōs/laos*; the people) and *ergō/erxō* (to do). It is popularly defined as “the work of the people.” More precisely, though, its meaning has evolved over time. In the ancient Greek secular sense, it meant the public work of a person. In the Septuagint, it was used for the public service of the temple and came to be associated with the function of the priest. In the Christian sense, it means the work of Christ the High Priest for the people. By extension, it is the work of the Body of Christ – the people of God – for all the people and the world. Liturgy is a communal celebration. Our relationship with Christ and the other – our concern for, love of, and service to the other; our *diakonia* – is constitutive of what it means to gather in liturgy. This article will focus on these aspects of our liturgical celebration as well as highlight ways we can connect the cult with the service to the other outside our ritual celebration. The latter aspect will focus primarily on the philanthropic dimension of the diaconate.

The human person is seen as created in the image of God and called to grow into that likeness. Our model for being is the Triune God - a community of persons in shared love. As Christians, we grow into God’s likeness through our relationship with Christ and our incorporation into the mystical Body of Christ. Therefore, as Mark McIntosh, a theologian known for his work on mystical theology, says, “becoming who one most truly is takes place by means of relationships, by means of love for the other – both divine and human.”¹ Our participation in the community is how and where we learn about ourselves, where we

¹ McIntosh, Mark, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 211.

cease to be individuals and become persons in relation to others. It is through these relationships that we have the opportunity to know God not only in a cognitive sense, but also through an encounter of the heart. Origen says more succinctly that communion with God is obtained by the “paths of charity and love.”²

In the Liturgy, we begin by praying for all in what is now called the Great or Peace Litany. We begin the litany by invoking a state of peace, through the words of the deacon, “In Peace, let us pray to the Lord.” Peace is an important theme and even a precondition of the Eucharistic celebration. It prepares the Church to offer and receive the Eucharist. We are to be in peace, the state of wholeness and integration within ourselves and with one another. As Bishop Kallistos Ware explains further, “we are to banish from within ourselves, feelings of resentment and hostility toward others; bitterness, rancor, inner grumbling, or divisiveness.”³ Failure to forgive may be the greatest hindrance to knowing God. This peace, however, is something that does not come from our own doing but comes only from God, “For the peace from above and for the salvation of our souls....” (This is behind the ambiguous meaning of the Greek text of the opening first phrase of the Litany —that could be translated as “In the peace of the Lord, let us be in need,” just as well as “In the peace of the Lord, let us pray”). Finally, this peace is not only inward looking but also looks to embrace all - for the “peace in the whole world...unity of all...travelers...for the sick, the suffering, the captives.”⁴ It is important to note that “captives” does not just refer to those held captive in a military situation, but refers to those who are captive to anything. When we are held captive, we are unable to exercise our free will, a unique capacity of the image of God in human beings. As Don Saliers, a Methodist liturgical theologian reminds us, “Praying for others requires looking clearly and honestly

² Louth, Andrew, *The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 58.

³ Ware, Bishop Kallistos, *In Peace Let us Pray to the Lord: Peace and Healing in the Divine Liturgy*, <http://www.incommunion.org/ka14.htm>, April 1999.

⁴ Quotes from *The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom* (Grass Lake, Mich.: Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America, 1975), pp. 33-35. Henceforth: *The Divine Liturgy*.

at the world as it is, and entails awareness of the suffering of others.”⁵ Solidarity with the other is constitutive of the *diakonia* of liturgy.

Peace with other believers should have primacy over duties in worship. As Christ commands in Matthew 5:23-4, “when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first, be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”⁶ *The Didache*⁷ also emphasizes this precondition of the communal sacrament, “Let none who has a quarrel with his fellow join you until they be reconciled, so that your sacrifice may be undefiled.”⁸

In the early Church, the Prayer of the Faithful of the Great or Peace litany was said immediately prior to the Kiss of Peace. The Kiss of Peace signified membership in the communion of believers. It was part of the baptismal rite and reception of converts into the faith. The Prayer of the Faithful in the *Apostolic Constitutions*⁹ incorporates this, “...and let the deacon say to all, salute one another with the holy kiss....”¹⁰ In our ritual action of the Kiss (or handshake) of Peace we actualize the love of God between one another. Each is our brother or our sister. Through the Risen Christ, we can move beyond our divisions within society, whether ethnic, racial, gender, or cultural, and assume a Christian identity. Our differences are transcended in the unity of the Body of Christ. As Vladimir Lossky, a noted theologian of the Russian-French emigration, writes:

The fullness of nature demands the perfect unity of
humanity, one body that is realized in the Church.... Within

⁵ E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill, eds., *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before Go: Essays in Honor of Don Saliers*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Order of St. Benedict), 21. Henceforth: *Liturgy and the Moral Self*.

⁶ Matthew 5: 23-4, NRSV.

⁷ *The Didache* is a 2nd c. church document outlining early church liturgics and ethics.

⁸ *Didache* 14:2.

⁹ The *Apostolic Constitutions* is a 4th-5th century document of Syrian origin that outlines early church ethics and liturgics.

¹⁰ *Apostolic Constitutions*, Book VIII, 11.

the unity of the common nature the persons are not parts, but each a whole, finding accomplishment of its fullness in union with God.¹¹

The Kiss of Peace has remained an integral expression of forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity throughout the development of the Liturgy. In our current liturgical situation, the practice of exchanging the Kiss of Peace varies. In some places, it is relegated to a clerical act and only exchanged when clerics concelebrate. In others, the congregation is invited to participate. I would argue that in order for all to experience its power, everyone must exchange the Kiss of Peace. True *diakonia* can only be exercised by the power of God's love and mercy. The Kiss proclaims this divine love. It is the basis for and nourishes a *diakonia* of liturgy.

In the 2nd century writings of Justin the Martyr in which he describes the practices of Christians to pagan Roman society, the Kiss is followed by the offering or sacrifice. He says, "Having ended the prayers (common prayers for the newly baptized, the faithful, and all everywhere) we salute one another with a kiss. Then there is brought to the President of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water."¹² However, the biblical concept of sacrifice not only includes the cultic expression of worship, but also our service to the other, our *diakonia*. Justin Martyr reports that all early Christians contributed to the offering, each one depositing their contribution with the president of the assembly. The president would then use the offerings to take care of "the orphans and widows, and those who are in need because of sickness or other cause, and the captives, and the strangers who sojourn among us. . . ."¹³ The practice of contributing to the offering was the responsibility of every Christian. Hippolytus calls attention to the first time that the newly baptized perform this act, on the day of their

¹¹ Lossky, Vladimir, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 1976), 241.

¹² Martyr, Justin the, *Apology 65* accessed via <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.ii.lxv.html>.

¹³ Martyr, Justin the, *Apology 67* in Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1980), 9.

initiation. He says, “Those to be baptized will bring nothing with them except what each one brings for the Eucharist. For it is fitting that those who become worthy of doing so should provide the gifts on that same occasion.”¹⁴ In Africa, the donation of bread and wine by the faithful gave rise to a liturgical act. A procession of the faithful bringing their offerings would begin the Eucharistic celebration. Even today in some African-American congregations, the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with, as witnessed by one of my professors, “every member, old and young, women, men, and children, coming up the main aisle to deposit their donations in a large basket at the foot of the altar (and) the elders and children (following) with the bread and wine.”¹⁵ A similar ceremony exists today in the present Coptic rite where, prior to the Eucharist, a number of large loaves are presented to the celebrant, one of which is chosen to be consecrated. The remaining loaves are distributed after the service. In the East, the gifts of the faithful were deposited in the *Skeuphylakion* (outer area) prior to the celebration of the liturgy. The deacons would then select the portion to be offered to God and carry it to the altar area at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Faithful, what we now know as the Great Entrance. The remaining gifts would be blessed and then be distributed to the poor, the orphans, widows or anyone in need. This was the responsibility of the bishop and usually done by the deacon (or deaconess) as the agent of the bishop. A remnant of this practice has survived in our liturgical practice. At present, the *Antidoron* (“in place of the gift”) is blessed at the end of the Anaphora and distributed to the gathering at the end of the service. The *diakonia* of the offering connects our service to God with our service to our neighbor. It is constitutive of our liturgical celebration. I recommend that it be renewed more fully in our modern liturgical practice. I will offer some practical suggestions for doing so at the conclusion of this article.

¹⁴ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 20 in Robert Cabie, *The Church at Prayer: The Eucharist*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1986), 82.

¹⁵ Morrill, Bruce T., *Holy Communion as Public Act: Ethics and Liturgical Participation*, unpublished, 12.

In the Eucharistic Prayer (i.e. the Anaphora) that follows the presentation of the gifts, we learn about God and all God has done for us. In response, we give God thanks. Saliers says, “The focal point (of this narrative) remains God’s gracious turning toward humankind. The human response of worship articulates a glorification of God in and through all that is human.”¹⁶ Our *diakonia* of praise glorifies God and shows our love of neighbor. It is connected in the meal and offering associated with it.

The Church is in the world to serve the community, to draw us closer to God and one another. The link between worship and service is crucial to what it means to gather as Church in liturgy. Liturgically, as we have seen, it is the deacon’s function to bring the people together and unite them in corporate prayer. Properly, it is also the function of the deacon to distribute the gifts, both to those gathered and the community at large. It is in our service to the other that we are united with them. Our *diakonia* of service to the other connects them to us and, by extension, to the assembly.

We are to follow the biblical injunction, “love one another as I have loved you.”¹⁷ While we are given the opportunity to enter into this love at every Eucharistic celebration, how we experience God’s peace and love are conditioned by the community’s response to God’s invitation. In as much as we can give ourselves over to the other, we can participate in and enter into this love. The more we enter into God’s love, the more we become who we are called to be, both as persons and as community.

The more we enter into God’s love, in a dimension beyond space and time, the more we experience the fullness of God’s community, not only the living, but also with those faithful who have lived in the past and those who will live in the future. At the end of the Anaphora, we pray for those who have gone before us and are experiencing the true

¹⁶ *Liturgy and the Moral Self*, 34.

¹⁷ John 15:12, NRSV.

light, "...the Theotokos, the ...forerunner and baptizer John; for the ... apostles... and for all your holy ones..."¹⁸ We also pray and ask God to remember – memory eternal – “all of those who have fallen asleep in the hope of resurrection and everlasting life...”¹⁹ Our *diakonia* transcends time. At this point in the service, we have just consecrated the gifts, the Body and Blood of Christ. It is a reminder that we all have life in Christ. As we continue to pray in the Anaphora, we pray for and remember all of the living in the hope that they will join with us in God’s love. In the liturgy of Basil we pray, “Remember, Lord ...those who do good works...remember the poor...nurture the infants; instruct the youth; strengthen the aged; give courage to the fainthearted; reunite those separated...”²⁰ Our *diakonia* transcends space.

As Alexander Schmemmann writes, “The content of Christ’s Eucharist is Love, and only through love can we enter into it and made its partakers.”²¹ Our Eucharistic celebration can be an intimate experience of God’s love, but it is also a work. It is the *diakonia* of liturgy.

I would like to conclude with a few practical recommendations for integrating a fuller expression of *diakonia* into our present-day liturgical celebration.

Use the built-in variability of the petitions in the Litany (e.g. of Fervent Supplication) to pray for specific, timely life situations.

Encourage the exchange of the Kiss of Peace among the entire congregation.

¹⁸ *The Divine Liturgy*, 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 90.

²⁰ *The Divine Liturgy of Our Father Among the Saints Basil the Great* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Press, 1988), 32-3.

²¹ Schmemmann, Alexander, *For the Life of the World*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 36.

Set aside 10% (at least) of the collection (usually taken after the offering of the Gifts) for the poor/need. This can then be given to any number of local and/or national charitable organizations.

Include the *Antidoron* in the procession of the Gifts. (The baskets of bread could be carried after the Gifts and left outside the altar area. They could then be given to the priest for the blessing at the end of the Anaphora (the usual time for the blessing in the Byzantine tradition) and set outside the altar area for distribution after communion.)

(Finally,) Include any other offerings (memorial breads, fruit at Transfiguration, offerings for the food pantry, food from which one is fasting, etc.) at the end of the procession and bless as one does the *Antidoron* (described above) and then distribute to those in need.