

The Priest then takes the *prosphora* and makes the sign of the cross over it three times with the lance, saying each time: *In remembrance of our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.*

And the Deacon adds: *Always, now and for ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.*

### *Celebrating the remembrance of Christ*

The Divine Liturgy is celebrated in two ways: in word and in action. In the words of the readings\* and prayers, we hear Christ Himself or hear about Him. In the actions performed, we see Him. 'We could say that we *see* the great poverty of Him who is rich, the coming to earth of Him who occupies every place, the reproaches heaped on the Blessed One, the Passion of Him who is passionless. How much He loved, and how much He was hated! How great He was, and how He humbled Himself! We see what He suffered and what He did in order to prepare this Table before us.'<sup>19</sup>

Through word and action, the Divine Liturgy is the *anamnesis* of Christ's life: *In remembrance of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ*, says the priest three times while making the sign of the cross on the *prosphora* with the lance.

The first time the Mystery was celebrated, Christ took the bread in His hands, and when He had given thanks to the Father He broke it and gave it to the disciples, saying: *This is my body which is given for you* (Luke 22: 19). Then He called His holy Blood *my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many* (Matt. 26: 28). 'By these words, He signifies that he is going to die.' Thus 'by the Holy Mysteries, He reminds the disciples that He will be slaughtered, and as they sit at the table He speaks about the Cross.'<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> St Nicholas Cabasilas, *Comm. Liturgy*, 1, PG 150.373C.

<sup>20</sup> St John Chrysostom, *On Matthew*, 82.1, PG 58.738, 737.

Before Christ was crucified, He celebrated the Divine Liturgy (cf. Luke 22: 19–20) — the remembrance of His Passion on the Cross. And He commanded us to celebrate it in the same way: to recall those things that seem ‘to betoken weakness, namely the Cross, the Passion and death’. Why, we may ask, when Christ said, ‘This is my Body, this is my Blood’, did He not add ‘...which raised the dead, which healed lepers’, but only ‘...which is broken for you, which is poured out for your sake’? Why does He not recall His miracles, but rather His Passion? ‘Because the Passion was more necessary than the miracles... His Passion is the very cause of our salvation... whereas the miracles took place in order that it might be believed that the Lord is truly the Saviour.’<sup>21</sup> Miracles are a confirmation of Christ’s divinity; the holy Passion offers us salvation and Christ the Saviour.

The Priest then thrusts the lance into the right side of the seal\* and cuts along it, saying: *Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter.* And as he cuts along the left hand side: *And as an unblemished lamb before the shearer is dumb, so he does not open his mouth.* Then as he cuts across the upper side: *By reason of his humiliation judgement was denied him.* And the lower side: *Who shall declare his generation?*

Deacon: *Master, take away.*

And the Priest takes out the Lamb,\* saying: *For his life is taken away from the earth.*<sup>22</sup> And he places the Lamb on the Paten.

<sup>21</sup> St Nicholas Cabasilas, *Comm. Liturgy*, 7, PG 150.384AC.

<sup>22</sup> Isa. 53: 7–8.

*A narrative of the Passion in actions*

The celebrant now removes the Lamb from the *prospora* and places it on the Paten, reciting the prophecy of Isaiah that refers to the Passion of Christ. We could say that the priest is ‘writing the Passion of Christ on the Lamb’ with the lance, for that which the priest now does is ‘a narrative in actions of the saving Passion and death of Christ’.<sup>23</sup>

When the Apostle Philip approached the chariot belonging to the minister of the Queen of the Ethiopians, the minister was reading the words of Isaiah that the celebrant has just recited. On that occasion, the Apostle, *beginning with this scripture, told him the good news of Jesus* (Acts 8: 32-5). Now the celebrant, using those same words of Isaiah, begins the good news of Christ’s eucharistic Sacrifice.

*i. Like a sheep He was led to the slaughter*

These words from the Prophet Isaiah refer to the Passion of Christ. When Christ ‘offers Himself as a sacrifice and an offering to God for our sins, He is called *the Lamb of God* [John 1: 29] and *sheep* [Isa. 53: 7].’<sup>24</sup> He is the unblemished Lamb that is sacrificed for the lost sheep which is man (cf. Matt. 18: 12).

Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross was prefigured in the Jewish Passover with the slaughter of the sheep. The Jews used a sheep as the sacrificial victim ‘because of its innocence, and because fleece was the covering of our ancient nakedness [that is, the nakedness of the first-formed humans after their disobedience]. Moreover, Christ, the victim who was sacrificed for our sake, is and is called a garment of incorruption’ (cf. Rom. 13: 14).<sup>25</sup> When the Master was stripped naked on the life-giving Cross, He became a garment of incorruption for man.

<sup>23</sup> St Nicholas Cabasilas, *Comm. Liturgy*, 6, PG 150.381A.

<sup>24</sup> St Basil the Great, *On Psalm 28*, 5, PG 29.296B.

<sup>25</sup> St Gregory the Theologian, *Homily 45*, 13, PG 36.640C.

*ii. As an unblemished lamb before its shearer is dumb*

Christ's silence during the Passion indicates that He accepted His Crucifixion willingly: *I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord* (John 10: 17–8). By His own will, Christ 'endured the Cross for us. For He Himself offered Himself, as a holy victim, to God the Father.'<sup>26</sup>

Christ is silent before the High Priests and before Herod (cf. Matt. 26: 63, Luke 23: 9). He is also silent before Pilate: *Jesus gave him no answer* (John 19: 9). But Pilate interprets His silence as contempt for his own person; 'for he in no way understood the mystery of Christ's silence'.<sup>27</sup>

*iii. By reason of His humiliation judgement was denied Him*

Christ's silence and humility resulted in His being deprived of justice: *judgement was denied him*. And the unjust sentence passed upon Him led Christ to the Cross.

In becoming human, Christ *emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross* (Phil. 2: 7–8). From His Father's throne, Christ trod the way of humiliation and arrived at the Cross. 'As was the exaltation Christ enjoyed, so correspondingly great was the humiliation that He endured... Truly, it is something momentous that Christ became a slave! It is something altogether inexpressible. Yet for Him to undergo death in addition is something greater still. But there is even something much greater and more wonderful than this. What is that?... Death on a cross... a death shameful and accursed. For it is said: *cursed be every one that hangs on a tree* [Deut. 21: 23, Gal. 3: 13]'.<sup>28</sup>

Christ is love. From the height of the Cross, He showed the heights of love and the depths of humility.

<sup>26</sup> St Cyril of Alexandria, *On John*, 5.1, PG 73.721A.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 12, PG 74.640C.

<sup>28</sup> St John Chrysostom, *On Philippians*, 7.3, PG 62.232.

*iv. Who shall declare His generation?*

By the word *generation*, the Prophet Isaiah means the mystery of Christ's generation before the ages. It is asked: 'Who is able to express, even in the smallest part, the mode of existence of the Only-begotten? What tongue can tell of the Son's ineffable generation from the Father?' That Christ was begotten of the Father, 'we know and believe. But the mode of His generation is a mystery inaccessible to any mind.'<sup>29</sup>

*v. For His life is taken away from the earth*

The action of taking out the Lamb from the *prosphora* and placing it on the Paten recalls Christ's words, *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself* (John 12: 32).

Christ's sacrifice was offered for the entire world. St John Chrysostom writes: 'Why was Christ slaughtered on a tall cross and not in an enclosed space with a roof?... Because the nature of the air was purified when Christ, the Lamb, was sacrificed on high. The earth too was purified, for blood dripped upon it from His side... That was why Christ was sacrificed outside the city and outside the walls, so that you might learn that His sacrifice was for all men... His offering was for the entire earth.'<sup>30</sup> The Passover lamb was sacrificed by the Jews secretly, and exclusively for themselves. Christ opens His arms on the Cross in order to embrace and sanctify the whole world: 'Stretching out Your hands upon the Cross, Merciful One, You brought together the nations which had grown distant from You, to glorify Your abundant goodness.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> St Cyril of Alexandria, *On John*, 5, PG 73.712CD.

<sup>30</sup> *On the Cross and the Thief* 1, 1, PG 49.400.

<sup>31</sup> *Octoechos*, Wednesday Matins, Tone 1, *kathisma*.\* Cf. Holy Saturday Matins, *Engomia*,\* stasis\* 1: 'Of old, they sacrificed the lamb in secret; but when You were sacrificed beneath the open sky, forbearing Saviour, You purified the whole creation.'

Deacon: *Sacrifice, Master.*

The Priest sacrifices — that is, he makes a deep vertical cut in the underside of the Lamb — saying: *The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, is sacrificed for the life and salvation of the world.*<sup>32</sup>

Deacon: *Crucify, Master.*

And the Priest makes another cut in the Lamb, horizontally across the vertical cut so forming a cross, saying: *When you were crucified, O Christ, the tyranny was destroyed; the power of the enemy was trampled. For it was not an Angel or a man, but you the very Lord who saved us: glory to you.*<sup>33</sup>

### *The Lamb of God is sacrificed*

In words and actions, the priest continues the narrative of Christ's Passion: *The Lamb of God is sacrificed.* 'The true Lamb, the unblemished victim, is led to the slaughter for the sake of us all, in order to remove the sin of the world...to abolish death... and to become the beginning of every good thing for the human race...the source of eternal life, the foundation for our reformation in the likeness of God, the beginning of reverence and righteousness, the path to the Kingdom of heaven... Because we lived amidst many sins and were therefore in the debt of death and corruption, the Father gave His Son as a ransom for us... One died for the sake of all, that we all might live in Him.'<sup>34</sup>

When the Lord was crucified, the tyranny of the Devil was shattered and the 'knowledge of God' took root. Now 'the consubstantial Trinity is worshipped, the uncreated Godhead, the

<sup>32</sup> John 1: 29 and 6: 51.

<sup>33</sup> *Octoechos*, Friday Matins, Tone 1, *kathisma*. Cf. Isa. 63: 9.

<sup>34</sup> St Cyril of Alexandria, *On John*, 2, PG 73.192B-D.

one true God, the Creator and Lord of all. The virtues are cultivated, the hope of resurrection has been given us by the Resurrection of Christ, the demons tremble before human beings, who had previously been subservient to them. And what is most amazing: all this has been achieved through the Cross, the Passion and death.<sup>35</sup>

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The Athonite Elder Paisios († 12.7.1994) of blessed memory once related: ‘Something happened to me when it was my duty to assist the celebrating priest. At the words *the Lamb of God is sacrificed*, I saw the Lamb on the Paten writhing like a lamb being slaughtered. How could I ever dare approach there again! That is why the priests should not cut up the *prosphora* before hand. When they say those words, that is when they should take the holy lance and cut the *prosphora*.’

That experience so shook the Elder that he was never willing to receive the grace of priesthood himself.

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<sup>35</sup> St John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 4.77, PG 94.1108CD-1109A.