

impatience for the appearance of her Lord. No doubt this is just the way these two back-to-back parables in Matthew were meant to be read by the Spirit who inspired them. The midnight cry, "Behold, the Bridegroom!" (25:6), could only trigger in Thérèse, by a daring inversion, the ardent response, "Welcome, my long-awaited Thief!"

And this is how we, too, ought to do our *lectio divina* every day: with patience, passion, and divine humor, allowing ourselves to be wooed by God's Word into the merry dance of grace. □

SIMEON LEIVA-MERIKAKIS, OCSO, is a Cistercian monk of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts.

THE SPIRIT AND THE BRIDE SAY "COME": THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE LITURGY

• John Behr •

"The world has put the life of the world to death, and now we are committed to death. It is now time for the Lord to work, and he works precisely through this death, this pure sacrifice."

The subject of this article is the eschatological dimensions of liturgy.¹ It sounds a very abstract topic, but, as we will see, it is one that takes us to the very heart of the Christian faith, in a manner that is challenging, but also hopefully rewarding.

We often speak about the eschatological consciousness of the early Church: the sense that the first Christians had of living in the end times, that the Lord was about to return, that the second coming was imminent. It is then supposed that when the Lord did not reappear as quickly as had been expected, and some began to die without ever seeing his return, that there was some kind of crisis of confidence. And as such, it is then further supposed, the Church had to modify her life and self-understanding, from a sense of the immediacy of the second coming to finding a way in which to live

¹A version of this paper was delivered in 2009 at the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy's summer conference on the topic of Paul as a liturgical theologian.

in this world for a longer time than had been anticipated. In this way, it is argued, the Church reconciled herself to this world and its history; she became an institution rather than a charismatic body, an institution with its framework and structure, its rites and rituals, so that it could continue in history, but a history that thereafter is one of further compromises.

I am not sure, however, that there really was such a big turning point. Certainly there were groups in the early Church who expected the coming of the Lord as a distinct event that was to happen at a specific time in the not-too distant future. It is recorded that a Montanist group, for instance, went out to Pepuza (their new Jerusalem) to meet him, and there have been similar groups throughout history.

But it seems to me that when we think of the early Church as undergoing this kind of change it is because of what we think eschatology should be or is, and then we read that back into the early Church. For us, now, eschatology is primarily understood as the teaching about the last times, referring to the things yet to happen, things that will happen in the future, in the last times—the *eschaton*—the teaching about Christ's *second* coming, the resurrection of the dead, judgment, heaven and hell, and so on. We differentiate between the first coming and the second coming, two comings with different content: the first coming is his birth from the Virgin and his ministry culminating in his Passion and Ascension; the second coming is all the other things he will do at the end of time.

But is this the best way of thinking about it? Is this the way that the early Christians thought about it? And is this the best way for thinking about the eschatological dimensions of liturgy, or with regard to liturgy in general? If we think in linear, chronological terms, with the second coming being something different and yet to happen, doesn't liturgy become, as it were, some kind of time-warping re-actualizing of the past and anticipation of the future?

It is striking that the first Christians did not speak about Christ's *second* coming. Instead they spoke simply of his coming, his *parousia*, about the day of the Lord—the Lord who is, and always is, the coming one, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Through his Passion, Christ ascended in glory, seated at, or as, the right hand of the Father, leaving us his Spirit—the Spirit through whom we also can approach God as Father, as Abba, leaving us looking to or for Christ's coming.

The apostle Paul, the first Christian writer, is very clear about all this. He describes himself as

forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. . . . [For] our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil 3:13–14, 20–21)

Forgetting what lies behind, stretching forward, for our citizenship is in heaven, from it we wait for our Savior, and when he appears he will change our body to be like his. These are very dramatic and clear words.

Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians is particularly concerned with the teaching about the "coming" of the Lord (again he does not use the term "second"). We are "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:10). And Paul beseeches the Lord "so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess 3:13, cf. 5:23). And the community that he has fashioned will be his "crown of boasting," Paul says, "before our Lord Jesus at his coming" (1 Thess 1:19). By the time he writes the second letter to the Thessalonians, he warns them that with regard to the "coming of the Lord and our assembling to meet him," we should not be shaken by those who claim that "the day of the Lord has come" (2 Thess 2:1–2).

Clearly, Paul and his disciples are waiting for the coming of the Lord, gathering to meet him as he comes. But equally clearly, this is not simply a matter of waiting for what we tend to call the second coming: Paul simply speaks of it as his "coming." Why? Why no mention of a "second" coming?

Before we get to that, we should also take note of a couple of other points related to how Paul speaks about the coming of the Lord, about his appearance, and how he will change our body to be like his. That is, first, the connection between the coming of the Lord and our own death, initially in baptism (to sin, by taking up the cross), and then our final death and repose in the grave. Second,

that this death is spoken of in terms of birth. And third, how we, in this way, become the body of Christ

For Paul our entry into the mystery of Christ, as members of his body, is very clearly through baptism, which is in the image of Christ's own death and resurrection and an anticipation of our own death and resurrection (see Rom 6). Through baptism we die to sin and this world once and for all. But as we still have sin working within us, and will certainly still die, our life in Christ still lies in the future: to the extent that we die to ourselves now, we begin to live the life of Christ. To paraphrase John the Baptist: we decrease so that he might increase. And so Paul urges us:

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory. (Col 3:3-4)

Having died in baptism, our true life lies hidden in Christ: it is not yet clear that we have been recreated and conformed to the image of God after the stature of Christ. We are a work in progress; our blueprint, the statue lying in the block of marble waiting to be sculpted, is already in the image of Christ, though for now hidden with him. We are being worked on, so that when he appears, we will appear with him.

Or, in his second letter to the Corinthians, he describes us as

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor 4:10-11)

The life of Jesus manifested *in us*, in our mortal flesh, our earthen vessels. We *are*, in a very strong sense (not a metaphor) the body of Christ. We *are* witnesses to his presence, his coming.

Our emerging in the stature of Christ is described by Paul, very dramatically, as a birth: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19). We are being born, or rather Christ is being born in us: the apostle, by his preaching, is our father, and the Church our mother, the Jerusalem from on high, the barren one who gives birth to many children:

The Jerusalem above is free and she is our mother, for it is written "Rejoice O barren one who does not bear, break forth and shout, you who are not in travail, for the children of her that is barren is more than the children of her that is married says the Lord." (Gal 4:26-27; Is 54:1)

It is revealing that the verse from Isaiah quoted by Paul is the one that follows the long hymn of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, regarding the one marred beyond all human semblance, who has borne our iniquities; taken upon himself, as a lamb, all our offences; offering intercession to God for us. This portrayal of the suffering servant is completed in this verse about the barren women bearing many children, for it is Christ's Passion that results in the birth through baptism of many sons of God in the mother Church. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition, this passage is only read liturgically on Holy Friday after the body of Christ is taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb, and that the reading includes Isaiah 54:1, the verse that modern scholars would identify as the beginning of another oracle, having nothing to do with what went before.

Being reborn in this way we are the body of Christ: Christians are those who have been born again in Christ Jesus through the Gospel; they are the ones who are having Christ formed in them. Paul is not only the one who is in travail with them, but is the paradigm of the state to which they are called:

I have been crucified with Christ: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20)

Having been crucified with Christ, Christ not only now lives in Paul, but Paul no longer lives. He identifies himself with Christ. Born again through the Gospel in Christ Jesus, or having Christ formed in them, Christians are the body of Christ. This is not simply a loose analogy or metaphor. Paul makes the identification without qualification: "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it," he says, all, that is, who "by the one Spirit were baptized into the one body" (1 Cor 12:27, 13). Christians are called to be "the one body," by living in subjection to the head, Christ, and allowing his peace to rule in their hearts (Col 3:15). As members of his body, they depend for their life and being upon their head, who is Christ,

“the head of the body, the Church” (Col 1:18–19, 2:9). By holding fast to the head “the whole body, [is] nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Col 2:19). And Christians also depend upon one another: “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another” (Rom 12:5). The grace given to each is for the benefit of the one body, so that everything is to be done in love for the building up of the one body (1 Cor 12–13).

In this way Christians are brought into a new relationship with God, whereby, sharing in the Spirit bestowed in the risen Christ, they also can call upon God as “Abba, Father.” And waiting for our coming Lord with urgency and expectancy, all we can say is *marana tha*—Come our Lord (1 Cor 16:22). Or, as at the end of the Apocalypse:

The Spirit and the Bride say: Come! . . . He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:17, 20)

From the beginning, Christians are waiting. Expectancy is everything.

1. *Scripture and Eucharist: coming to know the Coming One*

There are two other elements in Paul that are important for understanding what is going on in liturgy, which help us to understand a very striking aspect of the gospel accounts, and, in addition, why the first Christians do not speak of a “second” coming.

First, a statement that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 15:

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15:3–5)

“I delivered (or ‘traditioned’) what I received.” This is a very significant phrase, one that Paul uses only twice. It is meant to indicate that what is about to be said is central to the faith.

Similarly important is the phrase “in accordance with the scriptures.” In fact it is so important that it is repeated twice in one short sentence and is also preserved in the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, which is still said at every baptism and celebration of the Divine Liturgy: Christ died and rose in accordance with the scriptures. Clearly the scriptures that he is referring to are not the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—for they had not even been written when Paul made this statement. Rather the scriptures in question are what we now call the Old Testament—Law, Psalms, and Prophets. And so it is with reference to these scriptures that Paul traditions to us what happened in Christ’s Passion.

The only other place where Paul uses this receiving/delivering formula is in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And in the same way also the cup, after supper, saying “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

This time it is from the Lord himself that Paul received what he delivers to us.

These are the only times Paul uses this formula. Recognizing the importance of these two elements helps us understand many other aspects about the Christian faith. For instance, why it is that we have our four canonical gospels: they are centered upon the crucified and risen Lord, understood and proclaimed through the medium of the scriptures, unlike, say, the gospel of Thomas or the various Gnostic gospels.

Most important for our purpose and topic is that these two elements are central in the gospel accounts of the encounter with the risen Christ. Most clearly on the road to Emmaus, where the disciples continually fail to understand who Christ is until he opens the books of scripture and breaks bread—only then are their eyes opened to recognize him. *In other words: we meet the risen Christ, the coming eschatological Lord, in the opening of the scriptures and the breaking of bread—i.e. in the Liturgy. This is the eschatological dimension of liturgy.*

I emphasize this as strongly as I can, because it is so important (and there is one further aspect to bring out): although the disciples accompanied Christ for a period of time, although they saw him working miracles and transfigured on the mountain of Tabor, and although they heard all sorts of divine teachings from him (and from his mother about his birth), they all abandoned him at the time of his crucifixion. In the Gospel of John it is different, and that is another story, but in the synoptic gospels, those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the disciples abandon Christ at the Passion. Peter even denies ever having known him.

Before the Passion, the disciples continually fail to understand who Christ is—they are very slow to understand (as Christ was not slow to point out)! The only exception is Peter's confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16), though this is the exception which proves the rule, in that although Peter is given a special revelation to make his confession, he immediately demonstrates that he does not understand, for he tries to prevent Christ from going to Jerusalem to suffer and for this is called "Satan" by Christ. One could say that, in the way the word is used here, "Satan" is the one who gets between Christ and the cross.

Moreover, the disciples did not begin to understand when they discovered the empty tomb. This produced perplexity instead—had someone taken away the body? An angel is needed to explain the empty tomb, telling them that he is risen and directing them to Galilee to meet him there. Nor does meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus finally convince them, for they did not immediately recognize him. And it has only been few days! The two disciples mention that they had hoped that Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel, but that he had instead been put to death. They also relate that when some women of their company went to the tomb, they found it empty. Even at this point they still do not get it. In a very significant sense, one could state that our faith is not based on the empty tomb or the resurrection appearances.

And so Christ reproves them:

"O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to

them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. (Lk 24.25–27, see also 44–47)

Without any other comment, Luke continues by describing how these two disciples persuade Christ to stay the evening with them, and how their eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread. But as soon as they recognized him, *he disappeared from their sight*, so that they were left reflecting on what had happened, saying to each other "did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk 24:32)

It is significant that as soon as the disciples, *finally*, know in truth who Christ is . . . *he disappears from their sight!* So, from the beginning, Christians are left looking for his coming, straining ahead to meet the coming Lord, living in this world while their citizenship is in heaven, and, in fact, it is now *they* who have become his body—being conformed to his image (by taking up the cross), being his presence here on earth, the ones through whom he works. One could even say that he disappears, because if we are his body, we cannot look upon him elsewhere! *We are now his body, manifesting and realizing his coming!*

From the beginning, therefore, Christ is known as "the Coming One," so much so that even *within* the gospels (written after Paul), Jesus Christ is called "the Coming One." John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Christ: "Are you the coming one, or should we look for another?" And Christ did not give an answer, but pointed them to signs—the blind seeing, the lame walking—signs that can only be understood as Messianic by going back to the scriptures (Mt 11:2–5).

But most important, and immediately significant for us, *now*, is the fact that Christ is known only through the opening of the scriptures and the breaking of the bread. The disciples did not come to know the Lord by "being there" two thousand years ago, on the other side of world, and so, here and now, we are not at a disadvantage. In fact, we are in the same position today. "Being there" did not help them. It is rather reading the scriptures in light of the Passion and in the breaking of bread that we come to know Christ, the same as we do today, in the Church. These elements (opening of scriptures and Eucharist) constitute, as it were, the matrix and the sustenance of the Christian tradition—the very fabric of our liturgical life. We now use the scriptures to praise God for all his work, especially his definitive work in Christ, praise that culminates

in our eucharistic sacrifice, which is not simply a “thanksgiving meal” or a meal remembering some distant past, but the meal of the kingdom which takes place “on the night in which he was betrayed.”

For this the meal to be such, requires that we confess our complicity in his betrayal—*now*—so that we are also his companions, those who share in the broken bread, those for whom the broken bread is “the medicine of immortality” as St. Ignatius put it. We need to acknowledge our part in his death, just as Peter must when he encounters the risen Christ in the gospel of John. Here, after the Passion, the disciples are back at the lake fishing as if nothing had happened. Jesus appears at the break of day, but is only recognized when he directs them to the place that they can find sustenance and find it in abundance. Only then does the beloved disciple say to Peter: “It is the Lord” (Jn 21:4–7). But before Peter can again address Jesus as “Lord,” he is confronted by Christ asking him three times, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” (Jn 21:12, 15–17). Peter has to acknowledge his past, in which he denied Christ three times, as part of who he is; he cannot simply return to the more comfortable period before his time as a disciple, and a failed disciple at that. Only in this way can he once again be “Peter,” the “rock” (the meaning of the name “Peter” in Greek); only in this way can his past failure be brought to a good conclusion in his work as an apostle.

These two episodes are linked in the gospel of John by its description of their settings: Peter denies Christ while warming himself beside “a charcoal fire” (Jn 18:18, *anthrakia*); likewise, when he professes his love for Christ it is again by “a charcoal fire” (Jn 21:9), one that, together with the meal, was provided for them. This is surely not accidental, for the gospel of John is otherwise very sparse in such details. It is meant to recall the experience of Isaiah (who saw the glory of Christ and spoke of him, cf. Jn 12.41): after his vision of the enthroned Lord in the heavenly temple, Isaiah cried out “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.” But then he saw a seraphim place in his mouth a burning coal (*anthraka*) taken from the altar, with the words: “Behold this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sins forgiven” (Is 6:1–7).

2. Melito of Sardis

Now, everything that we have been talking about—the encounter with the risen Christ, the coming eschatological Lord in the opening of scripture and the breaking of bread—is exemplified in an early Christian text, *On Pascha*, by Melito of Sardis—only published in 1940. Since then there has been a debate about what kind of text it is. It was first classified as a “Good Friday Homily,” although it does not really fit into a homelitic genre. It is now recognized as a kind of Haggadah—an exposition of the Passover reading from Exodus, which would accompany the Jewish table rite known as the Seder, which developed in diaspora Judaism, when the Passover sacrifice was no longer possible at the temple. This makes it, in fact, the earliest liturgical text that we have, and, for that matter, the earliest representative of a Haggadah that we have.

One must recall that the reading of the Exodus scripture was never understood as the recalling of a (merely) past event, but as a way of inscribing oneself in the same unchanging reality of God. As when Joshua urged the Israelites gathered at Shechem to devote themselves to the Covenant which God had made with their fathers, they speak of this as having happened to themselves (Josh 24).

Melito begins immediately following on from the reading of the scripture of the Exodus, and takes it to be speaking of Christ (i.e., directly, without the intermediary of a gospel text)

1 The Scripture of the Exodus of the Hebrews has been read,
and the words of the mystery have been declared,
how the sheep was sacrificed
and how the people was saved,
and how Pharaoh was flogged by the mystery.

2 Therefore, well-beloved, understand,
how the mystery of the Pascha
is both new and old
eternal and provisional,
perishable and imperishable
mortal and immortal.

3 It is old with respect to the law
new with respect to the word.
Provisional with respect to the type
yet everlasting through grace.
It is perishable because of the slaughter of the sheep,

imperishable because of the life of the Lord.
It is mortal because of the burial in the ground,
immortal because of the resurrection from the dead.

4 For the law is old
but the Word is new.
The type is provisional,
but the grace everlasting.
The sheep is perishable,
but the Lord,
not broken as a lamb but raised up as God,
is imperishable.
For though led to the slaughter like a sheep,
he was no sheep.
Though speechless as a lamb,
neither yet was he a lamb.
For there was once a type, but now the reality has appeared.

5 For instead of the lamb there was a son,
and instead of the sheep a man;
in the man was Christ encompassing all things.

6 So the slaughter of the sheep
and the sacrificial procession of the blood,
and the writing of the law encompass Christ,
on whose account everything in the previous law took place,
though better in the new dispensation.

7 For the law was a word,
and the old was new,
going out from Sion and Jerusalem,
and the commandment was grace,
and the type was a reality,
and the lamb was a son,
and the sheep was a man,
and the man was God.

8 For he was born as a son,
and led as a lamb,
and slaughtered as a sheep,
and buried as a man,
and rose from the dead as God,
being God by his nature and a man.

9 He is all things.
He is law, in that he judges.
He is word, in that he teaches.

He is grace, in that he saves.
He is father, in that he begets.

He is son, in that he is begotten.
He is sheep, in that he suffers.
He is human, in that he is buried.
He is God, in that he is raised up.

10 This is Jesus the Christ,
to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

This is a wonderful preface in praise of Christ, understanding him in terms of the scriptural account of the Exodus.

Melito then begins again by saying that he will re-narrate the account:

11 This is the mystery of the Pascha,
just as it is written in the law, which was read a little while ago.
I shall narrate the scriptural story,
how he gave command to Moses in Egypt,
when wanting to flog Pharaoh
and to free Israel from flogging
through the hand of Moses.

It continues with a fuller exposition of the scriptural story, seeing in all its details the reality of Christ. It is, for instance, because of Christ's blood that the angel turns away from the dwellings with lamb's blood smeared across the lintels: it is not that the angel does not like the smell of lamb's blood, but rather that he sees in the blood of the lamb the reality of the blood of Christ.

This is then followed by a more universal depiction of salvation history, beginning with humanity in Eden and the continuation of the way in which humanity continued in sin, but also the way in which Christ was also present, already working, in types, our salvation.

59 If you wish to see the mystery of the Lord
Look at Abel, who is likewise slain,
at Isaac, who is likewise tied up,
at Joseph, who is likewise traded,
at Moses, who is likewise exposed,
at David, who is likewise hunted down,
At the prophets who likewise suffer for the sake of Christ.

And then the first half of the oration comes to an end:

65 Many other things were proclaimed by many prophets concerning the mystery of the Pascha, who is Christ, to whom be the glory for ever.
Amen.

The second half of the oration begins with the words:

66 This is the one who comes from heaven onto the earth for the suffering one,
and wraps himself in the suffering one through a virgin womb,
and comes as a man.
He accepted the suffering of the suffering one,
through suffering in a body which could suffer,
and set free the flesh from suffering.

Recent scholars have seen in these words, "This is the one who comes (*aphikomenos*) from heaven," an allusion to the *aphikomen*, the piece of bread broken off from the main loaf at the Passover Seder of Judaism, hidden, and brought in towards the end. This *aphikomen*—"coming one"—is taken as a messianic symbol. Melito clearly identifies the Paschal Lamb with Jesus.

Now the oration continues with a cry against Israel for not having recognized him, but having instead crucified him. This seems to us to be anti-Semitic (the Jewish community in Sardis would have just finished their Passover meal when the Christians gathered to celebrate their Pascha). But the invective against Israel is always in the second person: Melito is saying to his community: you did not recognize him—you stand convicted. It is only as convicted that they are then able finally to recognize him as their Savior. And so, the oration concludes with Melito speaking in the person of Christ:

100 The Lord clothed himself with humanity,
and with suffering on behalf of the suffering one,
and bound on behalf of the one constrained,
and judged on behalf of the one convicted,
and buried on behalf of the one entombed,
rose from the dead and cried out aloud:

101 "Who takes issue with me? Let him stand before me.
I set free the condemned.
I gave life to the dead.
I raise up the entombed.

Who will contradict me?"

102 "It is I," says the Christ,
"I am he who destroys death,
and triumphs over the enemy,
and crushes Hades,
and binds the strong man,
and bears humanity off to the heavenly heights."
"It is I," says the Christ.

103 "So come all families of people,
adulterated with sin,
and receive forgiveness of sins.
For I am your freedom.
I am the Passover of salvation,
I am the lamb slaughtered for you,
I am your ransom,
I am your life,
I am your light,
I am your salvation,
I am your resurrection,
I am your King.
I shall raise you up by my right hand,
I will lead you to the heights of heaven,
There shall I show you the everlasting Father."

104 He it is who made the heaven and the earth,
and formed humanity in the beginning,
who was proclaimed through the law and the prophets,
who took flesh from a virgin,
who was hung on a tree,
who was buried in earth,
who was raised from the dead,
and ascended to the heights of heaven,
who sits at the right hand of the Father,
who has the power to save all things,
through whom the Father acted from the beginning and forever.

105 This is the alpha and omega,
this is the beginning and the end,
the ineffable beginning and the incomprehensible end.
This is the Christ,
this is the King,
this is Jesus,
this is the commander,
this is the Lord,
this is he who rose from the dead,

this is he who sits at the right hand of the Father,
 he bears the Father and is borne by him.
 To him be the glory and the might for ever. Amen.

This is a wonderful text, exemplary of what happens in liturgy, and especially the eschatological dimensions of liturgy. We began by standing to celebrate the Passion, the Exodus of Christ, understood in the light of the books of Old Testament being opened in the light of Christ. This then moves seamlessly into the celebration of the Paschal Lamb, the coming one—identified with the *aphikomen*—the part of the loaf hidden at the beginning of the meal and brought out towards the end. And then, in and through all of this, Christ, the coming one, is now present, speaking in the person of Melito himself. This is realized eschatology in action, even now when it is read as a text almost two thousand years later.

3. Sacrament as passage

From everything that we have seen so far, it is clear that at the center of the Christian faith, and of our experience of the Christian faith, and especially the way that faith is expressed in the life of liturgy, stands the notion of passage—*transitus*—exodus: Christ passing out of this world through his Passion, but passing back into it through those who follow in the footsteps of their suffering God, through their own passage in the waters of baptism and the incorporation into Christ by the Eucharist: we decreasing that he might increase; we no longer living, but Christ living in us; we providing the space in which and through which God enters into and works within this world.

The crux or turning point of these reciprocal passages is the intersection of time and eternity, the space where we meet the coming eschatological Lord and become his body, so giving the liturgy, as the matrix and nourishment of Christian life, its eschatological dimension, enabling us to enter into the paradise of the Kingdom. The world that God created, affirming that it was very good, is the same world that put him, its Creator and source of life, to death, so condemning itself to death. But by following him to his Passion, we can now return to this world and affirm its goodness. His action thus becomes the basis for all our life and action, as

Christians, in this world. And all that we then do, as Christians, has the character of passage.

Thus, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann repeatedly pointed out, the liturgy of the Church (and therefore the Church herself, as the sacrament of the assembly) begins when we leave our houses and beds, leaving behind our present life and concrete world to enter a *new* community with a new life. Liturgy thus begins as a separation, as passage. In the Orthodox liturgy, the opening preliminary dialogue between the Priest and the deacon also speaks of the ineffectiveness of our own actions and the need for God to work: “It is time for the Lord to work” (cf. Ps 119:126: “It is time for the Lord to work, because they have made void the Law”). We can do nothing. The world has put the life of the world to death, and now we are committed to death. It is now time for the Lord to work, and he works precisely through this death, this pure sacrifice.

The liturgy begins with an affirmation of the goal of our journey: “Blessed is the Kingdom.” We then enter, passing from this world in which the altar and the temple have been destroyed, to the only remaining altar that is Christ himself. Born again through the preaching (as Paul travails with those who receive his words as the Word of God), celebrating this with the “Alleluia,” we then continue with the Great Entrance by laying aside all worldly cares, so that we can receive the King of all, accompanied by the angelic host, lifting up our hearts and give thanks to God, in all and for all. In being returned, the world has once again become God’s gift to us, and it is indeed very good.

4. The passage and Eucharist of the martyrs

With the sacramental, liturgical life of the Church understood as passage, it is understandable how our own passage must be understood in sacramental terms. Christian life begins with death: dying to sin in baptism as a “likeness” of Christ’s death (Rom 6:5), and it finds fruition in the eucharistic self-offering of the Christian in their own bodily death in witness to Christ.

A striking example of this is how a martyr such as St. Ignatius of Antioch understood his impending martyrdom, his passion, as a eucharistic offering. Taken under guard from Asia Minor to Rome to be put to death there, he nevertheless writes to

the Christians at Rome, beseeching them not to interfere with his impending martyrdom:

Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ. (Rom 4)

There is a clear eucharistic allusion in his words. He continues by comparing this eucharistic self-offering to a birth, and in fact as his becoming truly human:

It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. The pains of birth are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die. Do not give to the world one who desires to belong to God, nor deceive him with material things. Suffer me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I shall become a human being (*anthrōpos*). Suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God. (Rom 6)

For St. Ignatius, undergoing death in witness to Christ, the "perfect human being" or the "new human being" (Smyrn 4.2; Eph 20.1), is a birth into a new life, which means to emerge as Christ himself, a fully human being.

St. Irenaeus quotes St. Ignatius' words about being the wheat of Christ and develops the imagery:

Just as the wood of the vine, planted in the earth, bore fruit in its own time, and the grain of wheat, falling into the earth and being decomposed, was raised up by the Spirit of God who sustains all, then, by wisdom, they come to the use of humans, and receiving the Word of God, become Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ; in the same way, our bodies, nourished by it, having been placed in the earth and decomposing in it, shall rise in their time, when the Word of God bestows on them the resurrection to the glory of God the Father, who secures immortality for the mortal and bountifully bestows incorruptibility on the corruptible (cf. 1 Cor 15:53), because the power of God is made perfect in weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9), that we may never become puffed up, as if we had life from ourselves, nor exalted against God, entertaining ungrateful thoughts, but learning by experience that it is from his excellence, and not from our own nature, that we have eternal continuance, that we should neither undervalue the true glory of God nor be ignorant

of our true nature, but we should know what God can do and what benefits human beings, and that we should never mistake the true understanding of things as they are, that is, of God and of the human being. (*Against the Heresies* 5.2.3)

There is clearly a close relationship between the process that leads to the Eucharist and to the Resurrection: it is by receiving the Eucharist, as the wheat and the vine receive the fecundity of the Spirit, that we are prepared, as we also make the fruits into the bread and wine, for the resurrection effected by the Word, at which point, just as the bread and wine receive the Word and so become the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eucharist, so also our bodies will receive immortality and incorruptibility from the Father. Our own death, because of Christ's sacrifice, can take on a eucharistic character, and in the economy of God, making human beings in his image—the image of God that is the crucified and risen Lord—this whole work can be described as the Eucharist of God.

One can see a similar eucharistic dimension in the accounts of the martyrs. For instance, in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* the entire narrative of his suffering is clearly based on that of Christ (and it is explicitly said that it is described in this way): Polycarp waits to be betrayed, rather than putting himself forward (1); the captain of the police is called Herod (6); Polycarp is led into the city sitting on an ass (8); before his passion, Polycarp offers a great prayer (14)—which is replete with eucharistic imagery; and, strikingly, when he is being burnt, it is described as bread being baked (15). After he is finally put to death, his disciples desire to have fellowship with his holy flesh (17), making clear that they do not worship him as they do Christ, the Son of God, but they love the martyrs "as disciples and imitators of the Lord" (17); and finally his bones are taken, and put in an appropriate place:

There the Lord will permit us to come together according to our power in gladness and joy, and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already contested, and for the practice and training of those whose fate it shall be. (18)

The other aspect that we observed in the Pauline material about the "coming" of the Lord, was the connection between our passage out of this world through our own death, a death which is understood as birth and Christ's entry into this world. This is again seen in the

martyrdom literature, in particular in the very dramatic account of the persecution of Christians in Gaul in the year 177 AD (probably written by Irenaeus) known as “Letter from the churches of Vienne and Lyons to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia” (found in *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1–3). During the first round in the arena, some of the Christians “appeared to be unprepared and untrained, as yet weak and unable to endure such a great conflict.” About ten of these, the letter says, proved to be “stillborn” or “miscarried,” causing great sorrow to the others and weakening the resolve of those yet to undergo their torture (*EH* 5.1.11). However, these stillborn Christians were encouraged through the zeal of the others, especially the slave girl Blandina, the heroine of the story (more lines are devoted to her than to any other figure, and she is named, while her mistress remains nameless). She personifies the theology of martyrdom based on Christ’s words to Paul: “My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). Blandina is specifically described as so “weak in body” that the others were fearful lest she not be able to make the good confession; yet

[she] was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn until dusk were weary and beaten. They themselves admitted that they were beaten . . . astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken. (*EH* 5.1.18)

Not only is she, in her weakness, filled with divine power by her confession, but she becomes fully identified with the one whose body was broken on Golgotha: when hung on a stake in the arena,

she seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ’s sake will have eternal fellowship in the living God. (*EH* 5.1.41)

Through her suffering, Blandina becomes identified with Christ (she no longer lives, but Christ lives in her). Her passage out of this world is his entry into it. And this is again a birth. After describing her suffering, and that of another Christian called Attalus, the letter continues:

Through their continued life the dead were made alive, and the witnesses (martyrs) showed favor to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat. (*EH* 5.1.45–6)

The Christians who turned away from making their confession are simply dead: their lack of preparation has meant that they are stillborn children of the Virgin Mother, the Church. But strengthened by the witness of others, they also are able to go to their death, and so the Virgin Mother receives them back alive—finally giving birth to living children of God. The death of the martyr, the letter says later on, is their “new birth” (*EH* 5.1.63), and the death of the martyr is celebrated as their true birthday.

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These reflections on the mystery of Christ, its hermeneutical basis and its eschatological character, are intended to make the experience of liturgy, and the reality of what is enacted and perfected in its celebration, more accessible and dynamic. The passage, or *transitus*, that lies at the basis of the sacraments and of the Church herself, is the very heart of our faith, incarnating the presence of God in the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, now, in us. We stand at the intersection of time and eternity, and always will do, in so far as we also take up the cross and follow Christ, to bring his peace and love to this broken and fallen world, enabling it to be the paradise that God intended. The early martyrs show us the way that our life and death are to be the entry of Christ into the world and the “coming” of the eternal kingdom into time and space. Ours is a great task indeed. □

JOHN BEHR, an Orthodox priest and theologian, is Dean and Professor of Patristics at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary in New York.