

The Eucharistic Liturgy of The Syrian Orthodox Church

Written by Very Rev. Chorepiscopus John Meno
of the Eastern Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in USA

The Eucharistic Liturgy of The Syrian Orthodox Church is perhaps the richest in all of Christendom with more than eighty existing anaphoras in testimony. Among these is the Liturgy of St. James, acclaimed by liturgical scholars to be among the earliest, if not the first, liturgies of the Christian Church. We shall attempt in this brief paper to examine the Liturgy of St. James in order to provide a general introduction to the Eucharistic Liturgy of the ancient Church of Antioch.

Liturgies generally agree that the liturgical traditions of the Eastern Churches stem from two basic families, that of Antioch and of Alexandria. The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch is the direct inheritor of the ancient Antiochene liturgical tradition. In speaking of the Eucharistic Liturgy of Antioch, the eminent Dominican liturgical scholar Irenee-Henri Dalmais has remarked: “The Antiochene anaphora stresses the economy of salvation, the looking forward to the end of time, and the splendour of God’s glory, and these characteristics persisted in the Syrian rite.”¹ This eschatological thrust is perhaps one of the clearest characteristics of the Liturgy of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

According to the tradition of the early Church Fathers, the Liturgy of St. James, the brother of our Lord, is the original Eucharistic service used by the infant Church in Jerusalem. The Eucharist was instituted by Jesus Christ Himself at the Last Supper when our Lord took bread and a cup of wine, blessed then and gave them to His Disciples, saying: “Do this in remembrance of me.”² The Fathers of the Syrian Church state that Christ trained the Disciples to celebrate the Lord’s Supper during the forty days He remained with them following the Resurrection and that the first Eucharist, following that of the Last Supper, was celebrated under the leadership of St. James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem, in the upper room of the home of Mary, mother of John, called Mark, the present site of St. Mark’s Syrian Orthodox Monastery in the Holy City. This Eucharist was celebrated in Aramaic (Syriac), the language spoken by Jesus Christ and the Disciples. Very Rev. Dr. Kadavil Paul Ramban remarks: “The disciples of Christ used to meet on Sundays to ‘Break Bread’. Readings and sermons were added to this service gradually when the faithful communicants increased.”³

1. Irenee-Henri Dalmais, *The Eastern Liturgies* (London: Burns and Oats, 1960), p. 40.

2. St. Luke, 22:19.

3. Very Rev. Dr. Kadavil Paul Ramban, *The Orthodox Syrian Church Its Religion and Philosophy* (Alway: Always Press, 1973), p. 51.

Thus, from the earliest stages, the Liturgy arranged by St. James was expanded by additions, both Scriptural and ecclesiastical. By the Fourth Century, the fundamental parts of the Liturgy

were fixed. Dr. Matti Moosa points out that the Liturgy of St. James has thus been preserved in both Syriac and Greek, the two texts reflecting differences due to additions made through the course of time, but maintaining the same basic fundamental structure.

Due to changes over the centuries, the result of continuous liturgical additions, James of Edessa (d. 708) undertook a revision of the Syriac text of the Liturgy of St. James in order to establish a conformity between both the Syriac and Greek texts, while Gregorius Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) was to abridge the earlier Syriac text. Eventually, the revised version of James of Edessa was to become referred to as the “short” text. Of the many Syriac manuscripts of the Liturgy of St. James, the oldest is composed of a series of fragments contained in the British Museum’s MS 14523, dating back to the Eighth Century.

The usual Syriac word for the Eucharistic Liturgy is either *qurobo*, meaning “approach” or *qurbono*, “oblation” or “sacrifice.” The Holy Fathers of the Syrian Church often refer to the Liturgy as the *rosae qadeeshae* (the Holy Mysteries), signifying the profound mystery of the bread and wine, identified with our human comprehensible to external human senses.

The Liturgy of St. James as used today in the Syrian Orthodox Church consists of two basic parts, the Order of Offering and the Anaphora proper. The Order of Offering is composed of the Liturgy of Preparation and the Liturgy of the Word and concludes with the Creed. The Anaphora opens with the Prayer of Fraction and Commixture, the Lord’s Prayer, the Great Elevation, the Communion, Prayer of Thanksgiving, Dismissal of Faithful and the Post Communion Prayers. The consecratory portion of the Holy Liturgy begins with the Blessing of the Bread and Wine and is completed by the *Epiclesis*.

The Syrian Orthodox Church uses leavened wheat bread and grape wine for the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy. There is reason to believe that Christ used leavened bread, *lahmo*, at the Last Supper. Having concluded the Passover meal with His Disciples,¹ Christ took leavened bread into His hands, having already observed the Passover with its required unleavened bread. One loaf is usually offered during the Holy Liturgy to signify the oneness of the Word Who took flesh. When more than one loaf is required, two may be offered to signify that Christ is both the Son of God and the Son of man. Three loaves may also be used when need arises, representing the Holy Trinity.

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Dr. Mattie Moosa, “The History of Saint James Liturgy, the Divine Liturgy of Saint James the First Bishop of Jerusalem According to the Rite of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch (Hackensack: Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the United States and Canada, 1967), p. 88.

Two of the great Church Fathers of the Syrian Orthodox Tradition, Moses Bar Kephos (d. 903) and Dionysius Bar Salibi (d. 1171) have left behind two precious commentaries on the Liturgy of St. James. Through these Fathers of the Church one is given an insight into the rich symbolism and profound mysticism of the Liturgy of St. James. Their insights provide the basis of the liturgical commentary to follow.

Two times during the Holy Liturgy the priest washes his hands, once following his vesting as part of the preparation to ready the altar for the Holy Liturgy, and again at the time of the Creed. As the priest washes his hands, he thereby reminds the congregation to leave all worldly thought and become clean in heart, spirit and mind. The second washing reminds all that one should be thoroughly cleansed to offer up and share in the Lord's Supper.

The Trisagion or Thrice Holy recalls the vision experienced by the Prophet Isaiah of the Lord's throne and the proclamation of the six-winged seraphim: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory."² Moreover, the tradition of the Syrian Church of Antioch records that at the time of our Lord's Crucifixion, the seraphim descended from heaven and encircled the Body of Christ, singing the first three versus of the Thrice Holy, excluding the phrase "Who was crucified for us" as Jesus had died for men and not for the angels. It is said that Joseph of Arimathea, was inspired to complete the seraphim's chant, singing forth: "You Who were crucified for us, have mercy upon us." At the Trisagion, the priest touches first the edge of the altar board (tablitho), then the rim of the paten and finally the lip of the chalice. This through three ranks of the angelic choir in three separate stages, and that the mystical presence of the Lord is associated with these three liturgical objects.

Throughout the Liturgy the bending of the knees as the priest kneels before the altar signifies our fall through the transgression of Adam. As the priest arises, our own resurrection through the Resurrection of Christ is symbolized.

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I Corinthians, 11:23-26

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Isaiah, 6:1-3

The veiling of the altar prior to the Liturgy of the Word represents the time of preparation before the Christ's coming. The reading from the Old Testament is done at this particular time in the acts taking place behind the altar curtain. The veiling at the Fraction emphasizes the awesome moment of our Lord's suffering and death upon the Cross. It also represents the darkening of the sun at the time of the Crucifixion. The veiling before the Presentation of the Holy Mysteries signified the darkening of the sun on the last day in prelude to Christ's Second Coming in glory and majesty.

At the Blessing of the Censer there is profession of the Holy Trinity. The entire congregation responds "Amen" as the priest declares the holiness of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The censer is dramatically blessed before it is taken about the congregation. The censer signifies the Blessed Virgin who conceived within herself the Son of God, represented by the incense placed in the censer upon burning the coals which symbolizes our humanity. The censer likewise recalls John the Baptist going forth before Christ to prepare His way. The censer is brought into the sanctuary, carried forth to the people and is returned to the altar. This signifies Christ coming into the world and bringing to all mankind the infinite love of His Father, offering up Himself as a sacrifice to us all and returning to the Father, reconciling heaven and earth.

As the Creed is being changed, a deacon goes about the nave of the church with the censer and returns to the altar. This act signifies the goodness of the Holy Trinity which goes forth from Godhead, but is not changed or diminished. It likewise represents God the Word Who came down from heaven and became an incense of reconciliation, offering Himself for us to the Father and making atonement for all humanity by bringing us back to His Father without being changed or losing His Divinity.

By the Kiss of peace is externally shown our inward love and concord with our neighbor. Being made at peace with one another, one is made at peace with God. The peace given to one another does away with mutual enmity, signifying that Jesus has made an end of the enmity between God and man, making peace and love to reign among us. The Kiss of Peace also fulfills the words of our Lords: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."¹ It likewise recalls the words of St. Peter: "Greet one another with the kiss of love."¹

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St. Matthew, 5:23 and 24.

As the priest folds back the left corner of the chalice veil (shushafo) at the Offertory is symbolized the placing of a deal on the tomb of Christ. The unfolding of the veil at the close of the Preface (Proemion) following the Gospel signifies the Mysteries to symbolize the invisibleness of the Godhead concealed in the Mysteries and to manifest that Christ's Sacrifice was foreshadowed by the sacrifices of the Old Law. As the chalice veil is lifted and waved over the bread and wine, the Church recalls the angels rolling away the stone from the tomb of our Lord and underlines the flow of grace into the Mysteries and through then to all believers, bestowing upon the faithful forgiveness and salvation. This action also indicated the need to remove from our hearts the blind passions surrounding our human nature in order to truly see and comprehend what is about to take place upon the altar as we relive the Sacrifice of Christ.

Following the words of blessing upon the bread and the cup, the priest lifts up the spoon and its small cushion (gmourto) place these to the right. He lifts these over his right shoulder in a quick motion to signify the Second Coming of Christ on the last day which shall be like a flash of lightening in the sky. The spoor here represents our Lord and the cushion His throne. By placing these to the right is revealed that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father.

As the celebrant waves his hands over the bread and wine, he signifies the descent of the Holy Spirit from above and the Spirit's hovering over the Mysteries, as the Third Person did over Christ in the Jordan. The hands are waved in a fashion to reflect the fluttering of the wings of the Holy Spirit who descended upon the womb of the Virgin Mary and incarnated the Word and Who now descend to make the bread and wine truly the Body and Blood of our Lord.

At the Fraction the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Christ are symbolized with all humanity being turned from evil to salvation as the priest turns the Body from the left to the right with his hands. As the celebrant smears the Blood over the Body, we remember the dreadful and

redemptive act of Christ upon the Cross after which the Body is lifted up to signify the Resurrection of our Lord.

Later, at the awesome moment of the Great Elevation, the priest raises up the Holy Mysteries recalling Christ's Ascension and His glorification before the heavenly host. Two deacons stand with lighted candles, one to the left and the other to the right of the altar as the Mysteries are elevated before the congregation, signifying the two angels who appeared at the Resurrection and who were present at Christ's Ascension when they proclaimed: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, Who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven."¹

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I Peter, 5:14.

As the Holy Mysteries are brought down from the altar to the congregation for the Communion, Christ's Second Coming is foreshadowed and we are taught that at His coming in glory from heaven, we must stand in awe. As he turns from the altar, the celebrant holds the Mysteries with his hands crossed to signify that these are the united Body and Blood of the crucified Christ.

At the Final Blessing, the faithful are dismissed with the reassurance of our salvation in Christ and our commitment to Him through Baptism, a reassurance extended not only to those present, but encompassing all who have been baptized into Christ, both near and far, living and departed. Sent forth in peace, the faithful are asked to pray for the priest always who will shortly take leave of the holy altar, after consuming the remaining portions of the Holy Mysteries, in the prayerful hope of returning to once again celebrate the Lord's Supper.

The Eucharistic Liturgy of St. James is a deeply moving and richly symbolic spiritual drama in which the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of our Lord are relived and shared in by all present. More than perhaps any other, the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Syrian Church is directed to the Second Coming. The Liturgy is both in its character of mystery, appealing to all the senses of man both physical and mystical. The symbolism of word and act, of vestment and voice, of jingling censer and fans, of incense and burning sanctuary lamps, of curtain and veil, transports the faithful before the very throne of God and among the elect and praising cherubim and the six-winged seraphim. It is indeed a sanctification of time and space whereby heaven and earth are reconciled about the "table of life" from which we share in the Lord's Supper and proclaim together with all creation our Lord's Resurrection until He comes.

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Acts, 1:11