

SIMPLIFYING FAITH LECTURE SERIES

By H.E. Metropolitan Bishoy

#7 The Sacrament of the Holy Communion (The Eucharist)

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.

True Body and True Blood:

According to the Coptic Orthodox faith, we receive the true Body and true Blood of Jesus Christ, displayed as bread and wine. This is the great mystery of godliness (see 1Tim 3:16); this is the true sacrifice of salvation, which Christ delivered to His disciples on the night of His passion, immediately prior to His crucifixion. Some call it the Last Supper, others call it the Lord's Supper, still others call it the Mysterious or Sacramental Supper. We are currently speaking of the Divine Liturgy through which occurs the Sacrament of Communion. We call the memorial of this Last Supper, Covenant Thursday.

We shall explain why it is called Covenant Thursday. Our Lord Jesus Christ formed a covenant with His church by establishing this great sacrament. As we all know, our Lord Jesus Christ said, "*This cup is the new covenant in My blood*" (Lk 22: 20).

The Blood of Animals and the Old Covenant

The difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that the Old Testament was established through the blood of animals. When Moses the prophet formed the covenant between God and the people, "*Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, This is the blood of the covenant*" (Ex 24: 8). He also sprinkled it on the altar, the Ark of the Covenant, the contents of the Tabernacle of meeting, and Aaron and his sons. Overall it was a covenant through animal blood.

In reading the Book of Exodus, we find that when instituting the covenant in the Old Testament, "*Moses took half the blood [of the sacrifice] and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant¹ and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words.*" (Ex 24: 6-8).

¹ The scriptures written by Moses writings until that point, i.e. Genesis and part of Exodus; or maybe only the Ten Commandments which are mentioned in the book of Exodus.

The Old Testament is a Testament or Covenant between God and His people, containing commandments (most importantly the Ten Commandments) He gave them, which they covenanted to obey and fulfill. For the relationship between God and His people to be sealed, it was stamped with the blood of the sacrifice. Moses sprinkled half the blood on the altar and the other half on the people saying, *“This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words”*.

The Blood of Christ is the New Covenant

We find Moses’ actions symbolic of the New Testament. Instead of the animal (oxen) blood offered in the old covenant, *“Who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord”* (Ex 24: 5), the new covenant is through the Blood of Christ. All Christians believe that Christ’s Blood *is* the New Covenant, which is between God and His saved redeemed people who believed in His Crucifixion and Resurrection. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, *“If you love Me, keep My commandments”* (Jn 14: 15). **We also need to understand that the blood of the covenant includes a commitment or an automatic pledge of our obligation to fulfill the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ.** He Himself offered the blood of the New Covenant to His disciples on the night of His passion. The same blood shed on the cross is the same that Christ offered to His disciples on Covenant Thursday. This is why it is called Covenant Thursday, being the Covenant between God and His people.

Our teacher Saint Paul wrote, *“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed [to passion and crucifixion] took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me. In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the **new covenant** in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.”* (1Co 11:23-26). We realize here that our Lord Jesus Christ did not speak merely about blood but related it to a cup. The same applies to what was mentioned in the gospel according to Saint Luke: *“This cup is the new covenant in My blood... do this in remembrance of Me”* (Lk 22:20, 19).

The Cup and the Blood

Here we notice that Christ did not only speak of the blood, but linked the blood to the cup². He did this, lest anyone (like Protestants, etc.) argue that the new covenant is solely Christ’s actual Blood shed on the cross, in no way linking it to the Blood the Orthodox celebrate in the Divine Liturgy. One response to this argument is that Christ did not simply say this blood is the new covenant, but said, *“This cup is the new covenant”*. Furthermore, He continues, *“This cup is the new covenant in My blood”*, since certainly His Blood is the essence!

² Of course He did not mean the empty cup, but the one containing His Blood.

How the Church Discovers and Enjoys the Blessings of Salvation

Where is the covenant the Lord made with His people, that His church may experience and encounter salvation, if not in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharistic?! Every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy Christ's Blood is present in the cup. Therefore, He said, "*This cup is the **new covenant***".

We *live* the new covenant. It is not a forgotten, concluded, or considered a historical memorial, but a living, vital, and continuous one. Therefore He said, "*This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me*". Saint Paul further clarified saying, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes*" (1 Cor 11: 26). This is why I say it is a living memorial, not simply symbolic. We proclaim His death because the sacrifice of the cross through His Body and Blood is truly present in our midst. If Christ's Blood, which was shed on the cross, is truly present, could there be a stronger memorial!

Is It Symbolic?

We proclaim His death by drinking from this cup, because we believe that it *is* truly Blood, in element wine. If we do believe that it is true blood, than consequently we proclaim His death. What is in the cup? If what is in the cup is not true blood, then how can we proclaim His death?! Saint Paul wrote, "*I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. [And I also say to you, judge for yourselves what I write] **The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?***" (1 Cor 10: 15-16).

What will we bless if it is symbolic? Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night of His passions, blessed the cup, as Saint Matthew writes, "*And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat; this is My body. Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*" (Matt 26:26). If Our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself said "*This is My blood*", who dares claim that this is only symbolic! Do we not believe the sincerity of our Lord Jesus Christ's words?

How can the symbol forgive sins?! Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "*Which is shed for many for the remission of sins*", therefore we believe that we partake of our Lord's Body and Blood for the remission of sins. Saint Paul says, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death*", therefore, the effect of Christ's life-giving death, which abolished death, races through our innermost being when we partake of this blood. He continues, "*Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. [If it were not true Body and Blood, why would he be guilty?] But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.*" (1 Cor 11: 27-29) What does "*not discerning the Lord's body*" mean, except a person who is unable to discern whether this is true Body and Blood, or simply a symbolic commemoration.

Who Officiates This Mystery?

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?” Here, who is the one giving the blessing, and who is the one asking the question? The answer to both inquiries is Saint Paul the apostle. We read in the Book of Acts, *“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight³. Now when he had ... broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed ... And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers”* (Acts 20: 7, 11; 2: 42). This deed requires the presence of one of the apostles, their successors, or at least the priests for performing the rites of the Divine Liturgy.

“The cup of blessing which we bless”, who will bless? Saint Paul writes, *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God”* (1 Cor 4: 1). Thus he answers: *we are the “stewards of the mysteries of God!”* What does this mean? Saint Paul and the apostolic successors are commissioned to perform the sacrament that our Lord Jesus Christ instituted during the Lord's Supper. *“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?”*

The Altar of the New Covenant

Some inquire, *“Is there an altar in the New Covenant beside the cross of Christ?”* We reply that the altar of the New Covenant is the altar in the church, which *is* the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The sayings of the Fathers confirm this, but let us first continue with Saint Paul.

Saint Paul writes, *“Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?”* [In the Jewish religious rites those who eat of the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, are *partakers of the altar.*] *What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything?* [He is trying to say that there is a strong relationship between an idol (considered a demonic god), his altar, and the sacrifice offered on that altar.] *Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God,* [All who worship idols offer sacrifices to demons, not to God] *and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.* [Whoever partakes of a sacrifice to an idol is in fellowship with the demon, because the sacrifice, and the god to whom it was offered, maintain an actual, persistent, fellowship.] *You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons;* [The cup of the Lord is the Holy Communion.⁴ The cup of demons is the intoxicant imbibed while eating the sacrifice.]” (1 Cor 10: 18 - 21).

He continues, *“You cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons.”* (1 Cor 10: 21) So, what is the Lord's table? He began with *partakers of the altar*, progressing to, *that an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything*, so, he defines *the table of demons* as altars of idols. He said, those who eat of the sacrifices are *partakers of the altar*. When he began to speak of the Lord's table, he said, *You cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons*. An altar of idols (where sacrifices for idols are offered) or *the table of demons*,

³ Saturday eve to Sunday morning

⁴ Since the Apostolic Era Communion was being defended!

and the Lord's altar is *the Lord's table*. "*Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?*" (1 Cor 10: 22). From this passage we infer that the table is itself the altar, therefore, in the holy liturgy, during the prayer of Thanksgiving we say, "*All envy, all temptation, all the works of Satan... take them away from us, and from all Your people, and from this table, and from Yours Holy place.*"

In Coptic we say, "nem èbol \a tai trapeza qai", here derived from the Greek term *τραπέζα*: meaning table. Our altar in the church is the table of the Lord. **This altar** is the altar of the cross, or it **is the cross**, because we do not repeat the sacrifice of the cross, but this is an extension to it.

The Great Mystery of Godliness

The Crucifixion Sacrifice does not only flow forward, but also backward, as our Lord Jesus Christ Himself offered up His own Body and Blood on the night of His passions, prior to crucifixion. The Thanksgiving offering or the Eucharist Sacrifice extends beyond the limits of time, since it is a superior excelling mystery and Divine sacrament. Therefore we call it, "*This great Mystery of godliness*" in the Divine Liturgy.

Saint John Chrysostom (347–407 BC) says the following, "*What then? do not we offer every day? We offer indeed, but making a remembrance of His death, and this [remembrance] is one and not many. How is it one, and not many? Inasmuch as that [Sacrifice] was once for all offered, [and] carried into the Holy of Holies. This is a figure of that [sacrifice] and this remembrance of that. For we always offer the same, not one sheep now and tomorrow another, but always the same thing: so that the sacrifice is one.*" [Do not think that when two sacrifices are simultaneously being offered up, one in Cairo and the other in Alexandria, that they are two different sacrifices? Or that they are two different lambs? They are one lamb; "*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (Jn 1:29).] *And yet by this reasoning, since the offering is made in many places, are there many Christs? but Christ is one everywhere, being complete here and complete there also, one Body. As then while offered in many places, He is one body and not many bodies; so also [He is] one sacrifice.*"⁵

The One Sacrifice

The Psalm says, "*I will go into Your house with burnt offerings; I will pay You my vows, which my lips have uttered*" (Ps 66: 13 - 14). In the abovementioned verse as in all the Old Testament, burnt offerings and sacrifices were always mentioned in the plural. However, when Isaiah prophesied regarding the New Covenant in Egypt, he precisely said, "*In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, [this exists in the Moharak Monastery] and a pillar to the Lord at its border [this is the See of Saint Mark at the border of Egypt]. And it will be for a sign and for a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt... Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day [that day is yet to come], and*

⁵ P. Schaff, *N & P.N Fathers*, series 1 vol. 14, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1978, Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, Homily 17 (Heb 9: 24-26).

will make *sacrifice and offering*; yes, they will make a vow to the Lord and perform it.” (Is 19: 19–21). **Not sacrifices, but one sacrifice!** It is very strange that he speaks of the entire population of Egypt offering up a single sacrifice, logic says that when speaking of millions of people, this implies the offering of many sacrifices. The segment, “*The Egyptians will know the Lord*” confirms their magnitude in numbers. Not only this, but he also says, “*In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt which speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun*” (Isaiah 19:18); or Heliopolis, because Heliopolis means ‘*City of the Sun*’.

Through the Holy Spirit, he *must* have been prophesying concerning the New Covenant, because in the Old it was absolutely forbidden to have an altar to the Lord, aside from the altar Moses erected in the Tabernacle of Meeting. This altar was later translated to Jerusalem and implanted inside Solomon’s Temple. Today, the Jews who follow the Old Covenant and Law are prohibited from offering any sacrifices, because the altar and the temple was desecrated and demolished, according to the Lord’s prophecy “*Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down*” (Mt 13:2).

If the Jews have any common sense they would search Isaiah’s prophecy and ask themselves, ‘How can there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of Egypt.’ This means worship will not remain strictly in the Jewish temple of Solomon but will extend and be available universally! Our Lord Jesus Christ answered the Samaritan woman who inquired, “*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship. Jesus said to her, Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth*” (Jn 4: 20–24). Worship has become universally accessible, as long as it is offered on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the salvation sacrifice (the Eucharist) is offered. This *is* the focus of worship in our church.

The Impact of His Blood

Once, while in Birmingham, England, (H. G. Bishop Morcos, of Shobra-El-Khemah being with us) an English lady, impressed with the Orthodox Church, and wishing to join, met with us. After church she told us, ‘I wish to understand something. In our churches they tell us that the bread and wine are a symbolic memorial.’ Bishop Morcos answered, ‘Christ said, “*This is My body... and ... this is My blood*” (Mt 26: 26), so who dares claim otherwise?’ I added, ‘If a person bought a bottle of wine from the shop, is that bottle able to forgive sins? We partake of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. If wine is able to forgive sins, then it would be an easy means.’ She was pleased, and later joined the Orthodox Church.

The Eucharist’s impact on the life of a person is very potent. The departed Reverend Father Bishoy Kamel frequently mentioned a story about a Christian youth in Alexandria who wanted to abandon Christianity. Apparently, during the debates on this issue, with his family or with Father Bishoy, he entered Saint George’s church in Sporting, Alexandria. Being detached from the church, he had not entered it since his childhood. His entrance that day was during the

Communion, and when Father Bishoy met him afterwards the youth told him, 'I was very touched today!' Father Bishoy asked the reason, to which the youth responded, 'I remembered how when I was a young child I would enter and drink from the cup, just like those people who were drinking today. I used to drink something sweet and feel delightful.' Reverend Father Bishoy answered him, 'My dear son, this is the Blood of Christ, which washes away and forgives your sins. You cannot live without Him.' The simple recollection of partaking of the Eucharist in his childhood stirred him to turn his life around, returning him to the bosom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Eucharist Embedded in the Other Sacraments

The Eucharist is the source and focus of salvation in the church and all its sacraments:

Baptism: Directly after baptism a child takes communion.

Chrismation: Those who are baptized are immediately anointed with the Holy Chrism (Myron), then they partake of the Eucharist.

Confession: In the Sacrament of Confession, a person confesses to receive absolution from sins, by the authority of the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of the priest, in order to be worthy to come forward and partake of the Divine Mysteries.

Unction of the Sick: The Sacrament of the Unction of the Sick is either done on the last Friday of Lent, between the Matins Raising of Incense and the Divine Liturgy, or it is done at home where we pray that God may heal this sick person in order to return to church and partake of the Eucharist with the congregation. If he is unable to come to church we may take the Eucharist to him at home.

Matrimony: The Crowning Ceremony (wedding) traditionally occurred between the Matins Raising of Incense and the Divine Liturgy.

Holy Orders: When we ordain a priest, we ordain him during the Divine Liturgy.

All seven of the church sacraments are centered upon the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ (the Eucharist).

The priest censers around the altar with the incense frequently, to confirm that the altar is the center and essence of the work of salvation in the church. It is the presence of the crucifixion sacrifice in the church.

I Am the Bread of Life

Where was Christ born? He was born in *Bethlehem* ~ξ,λϑ(τψΒ, which is a Hebrew word that means 'house of bread'. Since His birth our Lord Christ has proclaimed that, "*The bread of*

God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” He also said, “I am the bread of life,” and also, “He who feeds on Me will live because of Me” (Jn 6: 33, 48, 57).

Further He said, *“I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever”. [Where do we get this bread that gives eternal life?] “And the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.” ... [Shocked at this proclamation, the people inquired.] ... “How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?” (Jn 6: 51-52). Even some of the disciples (other than the twelve⁶) complained. They began to complain against him but, “When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, Does this offend you?” It is further written, “From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, Do you also want to go away?” (Jn 6: 61-67). You are free to leave if my proclamation: “the bread that I shall give is My flesh” displeased you.*

This issue is very serious, to that extent that it scattered a large number of Christ’s disciples who followed Him. Christ was undisturbed, to the extreme that He told the twelve, *“Do you also want to go away?”* Go ahead! This is a very critical point, one in which bargaining is unacceptable.

Judas Ischariot and Communion

Our Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples, *“Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spoke of Judas Ischariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him” (Jn 6: 70- 71). When He addressed the twelve as such, “Do you also want to go away?” They responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). He accepted the answer of the twelve disciples in spite of knowing that one of them is a devil.*

On the night of the Lord’s Supper, before giving them His Body and Blood, He said, *“Behold, the hand of My betrayer is with Me on the table” (Mk 22: 21). “One of you will betray me...It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it” (Jn 13: 21,26). He gave Judas a piece of bread from the Jewish Feast’s supper. “Having received the piece of bread, he then went out immediately. And it was night. So, when he had gone out, Jesus said, Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him” (Jn 13: 30 – 31). Only then did He initiate the Liturgy, because Judas did not deserve to partake of His Body and Blood. That is why He did not overlook this point, on the day when He debated with His disciples and the Jews regarding the issue of His Body and Blood, but told them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?” In other words ‘I will give My Body, to you, my chosen few who have said, “Lord, to whom shall we go”, but there is one among you who will never partake of it (Judas Ischariot)!’*

I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom

⁶ Judas Ischariot, the traitor, being one of the twelve

He fulfilled His promise as Saint Paul wrote, “*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you*” (1 Cor 11: 23–24). Also in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, it is written, “*And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat; this is My body. Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom. And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*” (Mt 26: 26– 30).

What will He drink anew with them in His Father’s kingdom? He tasted it and gave to His disciples saying, ‘I will not drink the fruit of the vine again...this is the last time’. It is called the Last Supper because it is the last time He drank of the fruit of the vine. Why? Because in kingdom of heaven we will drink of God’s love forever.

This brings us to Song of Solomon where the bride says, “*He brought me to the banqueting house [in Hebrew: house of wine], And his banner over me was love... We will remember your love more than wine*” (Song 2: 4, 1: 4).

The *banqueting house* cannot be the house of drunkenness, because the Bible says, “*And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit*” (Eph 5: 18). *He brought me to the banqueting house* means that He has brought me into His Holy Church in order to partake of this cup for the new covenant.

His banner over me was love. Continuing to exist in this world, we drink of the cup and enjoy the love of God, but in eternity we will suck His love. It will not be grape juice however, but the overflowing love of God that will quench our thirst. That is why He told them, “*I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom*”.

The True Sacrifice of God’s Love

When we partake of His Body and His Blood, we behold a clear picture of God’s love. In reverent prayers of some of the Church fathers we find the following inquiry:

*Who of the masters sacrificed his Person for the sake of his slaves? Or what shepherd fed his sheep with his own limbs? What lover slew himself for his friends? What mother fed her suckling of her flesh? What motherly love is incapable of, mercy offered to us freely.*⁷

What master sacrificed his Person, himself, for the slaves’ sake? Or what shepherd offers himself as food to his sheep? Christ was born and placed in the manger (the sheep’s feeding trough). He came as food for the creation (who resemble animals in a farm), in order to change those animals into true humans. The Lamb was born amid the sheep; the Shepherd arrived, and

⁷ Echoes of Spiritual Pleadings: Printed in Arabic by Mahaba Bookstore.

to Him the shepherds flocked. What friend slew himself for his companions? Who would kill himself for his friends? What mother fed her suckling of her flesh? What motherly love is incapable of, mercy offered us freely. Who is this mother who would offer her flesh for her child? We hear, during the days of siege in the Old Testament, even in Jerusalem, that the mothers slew their children and ate them in times of starvation (2 King 6: 25-29). Yet God's love allowed us to partake of *His* Body and Blood.

It is well known that if you love someone, you long to draw closer to him. When a mother loves her babe, she loves to carry him or embrace him, sometimes even pressing him firmly to her chest from the strength of her love. **God did not only allow us to embrace Him, but to show His love, He allowed our insides to partake of Him. Our closeness to Him is not simply a casual greeting (shaking hands), or holding hands to express love, but Christ offers us His Body as food in order to mysteriously unite with Him; and He abides in us through love. What motherly love is incapable of, mercy offered us freely.**

The High Priest According to the Order of Melchizedek

We also notice the link between Christ's Priesthood and the Sacrament of Eucharistic. It was written of our Lord Christ that He is "*Called by God as High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek*" (Heb 5:10). Also, "*For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings...blessed him, ... Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better. ... Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him. Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek?*" (Heb 7: 1-11).

The Levitical priesthood offered animal sacrifices. Let us see what Melchizedek's priesthood offered, in order to understand the reality of this link. In Genesis it is written about Abraham, "*And the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley), after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him. Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out **bread and wine**; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him [as St. Paul said, 'the lesser is blessed by the better'] and said: Blessed be Abram [Abraham] of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand. And he gave him a tithe of all*" (Gen 14: 17-20).

Abraham, behaving as a layman, received the blessing from Melchizedek, and offered him a tithe. Of the descendants of Abraham, Levi bore Aaron the High Priest. The priesthood of Aaron, the Old Testament priesthood, offered animal sacrifices. When Christ offered Himself on the cross, He also offered a bloody sacrifice: His Body and Blood, which were shed on the cross. What is the relationship between this bloody sacrifice and Melchizedek, Melchizedek's sacrifice was bread and wine? It is impossible to say, "*You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek*" (Ps 110: 4 & Heb 7: 17), unless the bread and wine *are* the crucifixion sacrifice! Had it remained simply a bloody sacrifice, it would have no relationship with *the order of Melchizedek*.

In order to have a High priest you need priests, but what is the duty of these priests? They will offer the Divine Liturgical Sacrifice, which is the New Testament Sacrifice. With their sacrifice of bread and wine they fulfill the priesthood *according to the order of Melchizedek*. Yet, this bread and wine transubstantiate during the liturgy into the Body and Blood of the Lord, although they display as bread and wine. This is the connection between the crucifixion sacrifice and the bread and wine offering, and thus Christ has become *High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek*.

Sayings of the Fathers

The Fathers could not overlook this issue. Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335–394 AD) said, “For the Omniscient, by His majestic power [Jesus Christ] did not await the obligation resulting from the betrayal, or the Jews’ stealthy assault, or Pilate’s lawless judgement, so that their evil does not initiate salvation for the populace, and reason for it. [He did not wait for them to arrest Him and nail Him to the cross, but wanted to confirm that His priesthood is superior to the High Priests’ Levitical priesthood, so, on the night of His passion, He “*Took bread, blessed ...and said, Take, eat; this is My body.*” Thus He is a *High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek*. In saying, “*This is My blood...which is shed,*” He preceded and offered Himself.] By His economy He anteceded their attack, He Himself offered Himself, through the ineffable imperceptible act of consecration, as an offer and sacrifice on our behalf. Since He is both a priest and the Lamb of God [In other words, He is the priest and the offer, He is the lamb and the shepherd], who carries the sins of the world. And if you ask when this was? I will answer, [this is Saint Gregory of Nyssa’s own response] when He literally made His body edible, and gave it for food; thus the offering of the lamb was completed. When He allowed His disciples to partake of His Body and drink His Blood, He offered His flesh in an unutterable invisible manner, masterminding this sacrament in conformity to His authority. (On Resurrection of Christ Letter 1)”

It appears that, even from the first centuries, a number of the Fathers spoke of this Great sacrament. For example, Saint Ignatius Theophoros, (the God-bearer - martyred 110 AD), in his Epistle to the Philadelphians wrote: “*For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to [show forth] the unity of His blood; one altar.*”⁸ One altar and one cup of the New Testament. Even prior to 110 AD the Fathers were speaking of the Eucharistic Sacrament! An abundance of the Fathers spoke regarding this Sacrament, but this paper is not sufficient to quote them all. Possibly these quotes may be compiled into instructional books for scholastic benefit.

The Messianic Priesthood

Why was Christ’s priesthood called, *according to the order of Melchizedek*? For two reasons: firstly, because **He offered the sacrifice of bread and wine**; and secondly, because **His priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood**.

⁸ Rev. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol I, American Reprint of the Edinburgh Edition 1979, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1978, St. Ignatius Epistle to Philadelphians, Chapter 5, p 160.

Saint Paul writes, “*Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better*” (Heb 7:7), therefore the Levitical priesthood must submit to the New Testament priesthood. The Jewish priests must come, receive baptism, kneel to have the absolution read on them, receive of the Lord’s Body and Blood, and thus *the lesser is blessed by the better*. Melchizedek’s Priesthood *must* rise above the Levitical Priesthood! “*If perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek*”, this priest is not of the Levitical priesthood. The commission of the Levitical priesthood have ended!

A Life-giving Sacrament Beyond Time

We need here to give a warning: Christ offered Himself, of His own will, during the Lord’s Supper on Thursday, this should not make anyone think that salvation was accomplished on Thursday. “*For in the same night in which You gave Yourself up of Your own will and authority alone, You took bread into Your holy hands, which are without spot or blemish.*”⁹ This would be a grave error, since salvation occurred on Friday through Christ’s crucifixion on the cross! However, as Saint Gregory of Nyssa states, “Through the ineffable and imperceptible mystery”, since God’s authority is beyond time. He was able to make the crucifixion sacrifice present in a mystical way, during Sacramental Supper of Thursday. With that same timeless authority, He causes that same sacrifice to be present in every Liturgy throughout the ages; thus fulfilling His promise, “*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Mt 28: 20). The fulfillment of Salvation and Redemption were actually accomplished at the time Christ was offered upon the cross on Friday, accepting death. By the grace of God He tasted death (see Heb 2:9), for the salvation of everyone, trampling death by death.

One of the liturgical hymns of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom recites, “*When You sloped towards death, O Life Who never dies, You killed Hades by the lightning of Your Divinity. When You raised the dead from under the moist, the heavenly hosts cried out to You, O Christ life-giver, glory to You.*” In other words You are life, according to Your divinity You never die, but You sloped to death. Death swallowed up the excelling and superior Life. Smaller fish are prey to larger fish, but if that smaller fish were hooked to a fishing pole (concealing the line and bit), then that larger fish becomes the prey and not the consumer. Our Lord Jesus Christ concealed His Divinity, His surpassing Life, in His Humanity. When death swallowed His Humanity, which was united to Divinity, the bait was not Christ’s life, but on the contrary it was death. Therefore Saint Chrysostom said, “*You killed Hades by the lightning of Your Divinity*”.

Our Lord Jesus Christ offered the Eucharistic Sacrament as a covenant between Himself and us saying, “*This cup is the new covenant in My blood*”. If a document or contract were signed by blood, it would be an unbreakable covenant. This is Divine blood! Blood capable of overcoming all Satan’s authority; blood capable of purifying sin; blood capable of giving life, therefore during the Liturgy we say, ‘*This is the life-giving flesh*’. This flesh is life-giving because it is united with the Divinity, or the Divine life. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, “*I am the resurrection and the life*”, and “*If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever*”, also, “*Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day*” (Jn 11:

⁹ From the Institution Narrative of the Divine Liturgy of Saint Gregory

25, 6: 51, 6: 54). Partaking of our Lord's Body and Blood is uniting with the superior excelling life.

Advice of How to Prepare and Examine Oneself

Whoever eats and drinks, following suitable preparation, repentance and confession, unites with Eternal life. He is prepared to fit and deserve the grace of resurrection in the last day; he deserves the resurrected body. In Baptism, a person receives these rights, but what if he sins after baptism? By sinning, death enters into his being once more. Then, he needs to confess, and be absolved, as Christ instructed His disciples, "*As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (Jn 20: 21-23).

Saint Paul said, He "*has given us the ministry of reconciliation, ...and has committed to us the word of reconciliation*" (2 Cor 5: 18,19). *The word of reconciliation* occurs when the priest tells the confessor, "God absolve you." The confessor **must** be repentant, not carelessly offering a superficial confession in order to receive the absolution!

Church canons and spiritual instructions are available to assist people prepare for the Eucharist. Partaking of the Holy Communion cannot be with the intention of committing a sin thereafter. Examining yourself is very pertinent, as Saint Paul said, "*Let a man examine himself*". If he promises his confession father, 'I have repented, I won't do this sin again,' the reply might be, 'Wait for a week, or two, or a month, and let us see if you have truly overcome.' He might confess the same sins repeatedly, yet his confession father continues to support him.

Some people argue that they partake of the sacraments in order to overcome sin, then they revert back to the sin. No! A person needs to prepare for the Eucharist. The priest hollers, "*The Holies for the holy*"¹⁰. Why? Because a person needs to prepare and sanctify himself for having communion by repentance, confession, and abstinence from sin. But for people to partake of the holy communion, claiming that the mysteries prevent them from sinning, would be unacceptable!

It is true that the Eucharist reinstates to us the strength of life and makes us abide in Christ, but how can life return to us while we are still in fellowship with death? That is why the priest asks in the absolution prayer: "*O Master, Lord Jesus Christ...who has broken every bond of our sins through His saving, life-giving sufferings...bless him, purify him, absolve him... Absolve him from the bonds of sin*" In other words let him no longer be a slave bound to sins. He must be translated to a phase of freedom from evil; thus he is able to receive eternal life. Thus it is said that the sacrifice is "*Given for us for salvation, remission of sins, and eternal life to those who partake of Him.*"¹¹

I wish that we would not undervalue the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, remembering the words of our teacher Saint Paul, "*For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of*

¹⁰ Before the Confession of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil

¹¹ From the Confession of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil

judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (Heb 10:26), also, “But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Rom 2:5), and again, “But let a man examine himself... For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor 11: 28-29).

Do not scheme to betray Christ, like Judas, and come sit at the Passover table! That is why Christ told Judas, “*What you do, do quickly*” (Jn 13: 27). If you want to repent, then repent; if you want to betray me, then leave quickly because I want to initiate the Liturgy. When Judas heard this, he considered it his golden opportunity to run after his reward for betrayal and injustice – handing Christ to the Jews.

Do not consider in your soul that you can betray Christ, and advance to receive of the holy sacraments. You must resolve in your heart that you will not return to sin. Examine yourself! The world will not come to an end if you postpone Communion for a week, or two, or even three, until you have trained to let your will be guided by the Spirit. “*If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live*” (Rom 8: 13).

Lead by Example

I wish that we truly comprehend the value of these holy sacraments, in order to also be models to others, assisting them understand the value of these mysteries. When, during the liturgy we recite, “*Amen. Amen. Amen. Your Death, O Lord, we proclaim; Your holy Resurrection and Ascension into the heavens, we confess.*”¹² In other words the victory fueling Your children who are triumphant over sin, proclaims the power of Your Resurrection on Your redeemed people’s lives, proclaim Your Death and confess Your Resurrection. The congregation of saints proclaim Your Death by their death to sin, and confess Your Resurrection by their victory over evil. They follow your example in being a light to the world.

Through the prayers of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, may God grant us the life of repentance and readiness, so that, through repentance, contrition, and humility, we may anticipate partaking of the Holy Sacraments.

Glory to God forever, Amen.

¹² From the Institution Narrative of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil