

Saying "Amen" to Our Story

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It began in the middle of the sixth century as a liturgical innovation. The Emperor Justinian had learned that certain priests throughout Constantinople and its provinces were beginning to recite eucharistic and baptismal prayers silently (in an inaudible voice). He protested vigorously and, as an effort in 565 to confront this and other abuses in the life of the Church, issued his *Novella* 137, part of which stated:

Moreover we order all bishops and priests to say the prayers used in the divine oblation and in holy baptism not inaudibly, but in a voice that can be heard by the faithful people, that the minds of those who listen may be excited to greater compunction. [1]

Despite these efforts, Justinian was unable to stop this practice. This result "opened the way to a fundamental change not only in liturgical practice but in popular eucharistic piety." [2] From this time on, a more allegorical understanding of the liturgy was developed. Each action, which earlier had sometimes only practical significance, now acquired other meanings, often related to the life of Christ: the first entrance as his public ministry, the great entrance as his burial. Moreover, where the vision of the liturgy from its initial descriptions in the *First Apology* of St. Justin the Martyr (155 AD, Sections 65 & 67) had **stressed the action of what the faithful (the clergy and laity) did together**, emphasizing the words "us and we," there now developed – while using the same words – a vision of **what the priest does in front of the people**, giving his every action a symbolic meaning. [3]

Also, whereas St. John Chrysostom could write that, "There are cases when a priest does not differ from a layman, notably when one approaches the Holy Mysteries," [4] it would now be possible to show how a "vision" of separation grew between the clergy and laity, a vision which would have theological, sacramental, and even architectural dimensions. In reflecting on his experiences of worship in the Russian Orthodox Church, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his *Journal* that, "During the service, everything which could reach the consciousness of the faithful is carefully hidden from them; any semblance of meaning." (March 15, 1976).

Why should the eucharistic prayers be heard by everyone? It is important because within these prayers the Christian Story, our Story is announced and affirmed. In St. Justin's account of the liturgy mentioned earlier when "bread is brought, and wine and water, ...the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen." (section 67)

To use the Hebrew word, "Amen," is to say, "This is true. So be it. Yes." It is to say Yes, in Jesus Christ, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him, " says St. Paul (2

Cor. 1:19-20). To say, "Amen," affirms the desire to become one's true self in Christ. St. Augustine wrote, "To that which you are – say Amen and thus seal it with your answer." When the congregation says, "Amen," at the end of the eucharistic prayers it remembers and affirms all that God has done and will continue to do in the ongoing Story of His People.

The prayers offered by the bishop at this time were spontaneous, delivered "to the best of his ability." Gradually, they were formalized, expressed most fully at least in the Byzantine tradition in the liturgies of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great. The eucharistic prayers in these liturgies combine the "triune intuition" of the Scriptures, the themes of creation, fall, and redemption, with an underlying emphasis on God's steadfast love: "Thou it was who brought us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen away didst raise us up again, and didst not cease to do **all** things until Thou hadst brought us up to heaven, and hadst endowed us with Thy Kingdom which is to come." (Anaphora of St. John)

The Anaphora of St. Basil, which is served primarily on the Sundays of Great Lent, is a "tapestry" of Scriptural references, developing in more detail "all" that God has done. Fr. Andrew Morbey sees the *Anaphora* as a place to begin the preparation of catechumens: "Here may be found, in summary, an account of all that is important in what the Church has to say about God as Trinity, about the Son and the Spirit, about creation, man, the world, the work of Christ, the activity of the Spirit, the life of the Church, the character of Christian living. It is a compelling and moving vision."^[5]

The "silent" or "secret" practice of reading these prayers would exist unchallenged for centuries. In the 19th and early 20th centuries Russian theologians, historians, and liturgists began re-examining the foundations of Orthodox worship, producing (in some cases) still classic studies in the liturgies of St. John and St. Basil, the Typikon, and the Secret Prayers. In 1905, A. P. Golubstov listed some of the reasons why the prayers ceased to be read publicly:

1. In an effort to reduce the growing length of the liturgy, the prayers were read silently by the priest as the deacon was intoning the petitions.
2. The secret reading became incorporated into the *disciplina arcana* ("secret discipline") whereby it was felt that those who were "uninitiated" were unable to hear about the mysteries of the faith or of worship. This encouraged the previously mentioned division between the clergy and laity.
3. It was closely related to the period when the practice of frequent communion ceased.^[6]

In 1905, each Russian Diocesan bishop was requested by the Holy Synod to offer suggestions for discussion at the proposed All-Russian Council (Sobor – which would eventually take place in 1917). Half of the sixty-four bishops raised liturgical concerns: the need to produce a Typikon for parish usage, a re-examination of Church Slavonic or implementation of the Russian language, etc.) Several, including Archbishop Tikhon of the Aleutians and North America (the later Patriarch), recommended that the secret

prayers be read aloud. Bishop Nazarius of Nizhni-Novgorod wrote that, "in order that those present would completely understand the structure of this most important liturgical service, by experiencing it in all of its wholeness and seeing how it develops, it might be desirable to permit the secret prayers to be read aloud. This would even be in agreement with the practice of the Early Church. The public reading of the priestly prayers would uplift the prayerful spirit of the worshippers." [7] Around this same time, Fr. John of Kronstadt, known for his conservatism in many areas, was concerned that many people had a careless attitude towards the services and were ignorant of the "secret prayers." He wrote that, "The priest or the bishop recites many prayers to himself; it would be much more interesting and profitable for the minds and hearts of Christians to be aware of the full text of the Liturgy." [8]

Within the Russian Church to this day a serious re-examination of liturgical questions has been hampered by the turmoil of the Revolution and an idealization of pre-Revolutionary Russian life. The consideration of some legitimate reforms such as the reading of the "secret" prayers and the liturgical usage of Russian is no doubt further stifled by their association with the schismatic movement in the 1920's known as the "Living Church."

Despite this, Orthodox theologians in the West would continue to affirm the connection between these prayers and the participation of the laity in worship. Boris Sove, in his article, "The Eucharist in the Ancient Church and Contemporary Practice," observed that, "Following the introduction of the secret reading of the Anaphora, the Liturgy remained and could not do otherwise, a corporate Divine Service, but somehow the responsibility for the corporate prayer and offering was taken away from the laity." [9]

If we as Orthodox Christians would ask as one father did: "Where are the stories that tell us what kind of people we are as human beings," [10] we could conclude that they are found in our worship and, in particular, the divine liturgy. The liturgy, in fact, is the act by which the community remembers, celebrates, and affirms – each time – the retelling of the "good news" in its entirety. In hearing it, in saying "Yes" we acknowledge not only what we believe, but we say "Amen" to our Story as God's people.

ENDNOTES

1. Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy*, (SVS Press, p. 86)
2. Ibid.
3. Fr. Pavlos Koumariansos, "Symbol and Reality in the Divine Liturgy, *Sourozh*, May 2000, p. 14.
4. quoted in Alexander Schmemmann, "Holy Things for the Holy," in *Great Lent*, p. 117.

5. "Adult Catechesis: A Complementary View, "
Canadian Orthodox Messenger, Autumn, 1997, p. 9.
6. "The Reasons for and the Dates of Replacing the Audible Recitation of Liturgical Prayers with Secret Recitation," *Bogoslovskiy Vestnik*, Sept., 1905.
Translated by A. Smirensky. Available at: jacwell.org (Supplements)
7. John Shimchick, *The Responses of the Russian Episcopate Concerning Worship – 1905 and the Liturgical Situation in America*, Unpublished Master of Divinity Thesis, St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1980, pp. 75-76.
8. Bishop Alexander, *The Life of Father John of Kronstadt*. (SVS Press, 1979) p. 50.
9. In *Living Tradition*, Paris, 1937, p. 18. Translated by A. Smirensky. Available at: jacwell.org (Supplements)
10. Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story*. (London: SPCK, 1996) p. 2.