

Holy Synod of the Church of Greece; Athens, March 31 2004

ENCYCLICAL LETTER No. 2784:

On the manner of reading the prayers of the Divine Liturgy

To : the Most Reverend Metropolitans of the Church of Greece.

Subject : On the Manner of Reading the Prayers of the Divine Liturgy.

Most Reverend Brothers in Christ,

The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, in the framework of her permanent and unchanging concern for the strengthening of the proper worship of God and bearing in mind the conclusions concerning this subject reached by the Special Synodical Commission for Liturgical Renewal, desires through this present encyclical, to inform you, and through you to the whole complement of our Most Holy Church of Greece the following, which relates to the manner of reading the prayers of the Divine Liturgy, so that the participation of the totality of the People of God in the celebration, reading and singing in it, would become universal and together with that, fully realized.

The manner of reading these prayers in the past gave rise to contradictory opinions. However, inasmuch as the subject relates not only to ritual, but touches upon the people's salvation, by way of a conscious participation in the Divine Liturgy, it requires a thorough knowledge of its history, and the theological side of this problem, in order that correct conclusions may be made, and introduced into contemporary liturgical practice.

The witnesses of the first eight centuries (i.e., of the period of the first extant written Euchologion) testify that the people heard the prayers of the Liturgy. This is indicated for example, either by the evidence of responding with "Amen" to the priest's prayers (Justin, Dionysius of Alexandria, Jerome), or by the obvious indications that the prayers "were heard" by the people (Dionysius of Alexandria, Canon 19 of Laodicea, Lives of righteous Melania), or the use of the verb "I say", with respect to the prayers of the Divine Liturgy (Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian), or to places in Chrysostom about the priest who "responds to the voice of the people", and performs the Divine Service, as well as to the Body of the Church, which proclaims prayers of thanksgiving "with one mind" and "in one voice". We will add here an indirect witness about reading the prayers of the Divine Liturgy, with respect to hearing of them by the people, which is found in a most important text of the Apostolic Traditions, indicating that the bishop prays "by himself" during his vesting, whereas he "offers" the Eucharistic prayers before the Altar of Sacrifice.

This one tradition reflects the Pauline epistle (1 Cor. 14:16-17) that a member of the Laity cannot respond with "Amen" to the priest's prayers, if he does not understand them (consequently, if he does not hear them). The earlier cited Canon 19 of the Council of Laodicea refers to three prayers of the faithful at the Divine Liturgy : the first is recited "in silence" and refers to the worthiness of the celebrant, while the other two are recited "out loud". This evidence is also unique for the first six centuries, relating to a prayer recited "silently"; although it should be pointed out that it does not constitute a prayer of the central body of the Liturgy, i.e. the Holy Anaphora. Only at the time between the V-VI centuries, does the Nestorian author Narsis write about the reading of the Anaphora prayers "in silence". This practice was opposed by the Orthodox Church through Justinian's Novella 137, which affirmed the universal tradition that the prayers of the Liturgy ought to be offered "not in silence, but with a voice audible to the faithful".

The tradition about the manner of reading the prayers aloud for the people is clear, uniform, and universal. In the light of this tradition, we can approach towards the meaning of a theology of "secrecy" and "mystery", which became fixed in the Eucharistic terminology of many church writers after the IV century, and which reached its culmination in the Areopagitic writings, and in the Byzantine commentators on the Divine Liturgy. This was not so much about the manner of reading the prayers in secret (as was affirmed by some), which would be contrary to the liturgical tradition of the first six centuries, but an attempt to make the Liturgy a "mystical act", in the words of Maximos the Confessor).

The Euchologion manuscripts, preserved since the end of the VIII century, affirm the preceding liturgical tradition ; they affirm that "No one is worthy. . ." at the Divine Liturgy, "O compassionate, and merciful God. . ." in the order of Baptism, and "O Lord Jesus Christ. . ." at the Great Blessing of Water during Epiphany, are recited "secretly" (i.e. completely inaudibly) ; and the prayer behind the Amvon, the prayer "Great art thou, O Lord. . ." at Baptism, and the Great Blessing of Water at Epiphany, as well as "O Lord, who art immaculate. . .", during the Kneeling Service, are recited out loud (i.e. melodically recited with a solemn voice). With respect to almost all other prayers, the Euchologia clearly, or indirectly, attest that they were proclaimed in a "normal voice", which is prescribed by a number of ritual directions.

Thus, the opinion that the prayers are read either secretly, or are "loudly proclaimed", as it is commonly stated, is erroneous. What is correct, from the review of traditions found in Euchologion manuscripts, is that there are obviously just a few prayers which are read secretly, or are <loudly proclaimed>.

and that most of them are read <in a quiet voice> ,but <aloud> for the people, i.e. in such a manner [that the people could hear them/to be heard by the people]. This is the liturgical tradition of the Church, which is presented for adoption as the current liturgical practice. Except for the Prayer of the Cherubim, which the celebrant must read for himself, but audible to the concelebrants, and the prayer behind the amvon, which must be read loudly, all other prayers must be read by the celebrant in a quiet voice, which preserves the sense of the Mystery, the <Liturgy> and strengthens the reverence of the one who is praying, and in finality, <the sacred service/the sacredness of the service>.

The manner of reading aloud in a normal voice, at the same time, preserves the post-baptismal concern for the “mystical enlightenment” ; inasmuch as all the faithful following Baptism are “guided by the Mysteries”, they are no longer “unenlightened”. For the baptized, earthly life is a continuous “Bright Week”, a celebration of baptismal white garments, until the coming of “The New Day of the Lord”, and the meeting with the coming Lord. As “mystically enlightened”, they must be informed through the Mystery of worship, and this process occurs – except by way of other aspects – through the hearing of the prayers by the faithful. It follows that the manner of rendering the prayers must not be governed by teleturgic [rubrical] rules, but must be a method of instruction (“mystical enlightenment”) on the part of pastors, and teachers of the Church.

On the basis of this liturgical, historical, and canonical evidence, we can come to certain conclusions, and on that basis state:

- a) Everything in the Divine Liturgy has its fundamental purpose, and nothing should depend upon a religious, or emotional, or an esthetical disposition of the presiding priest.
- b) The actions which take place during the Divine Liturgy, have an eschatological character, and are received not so much through the mind, or thought, but by way of the “heart”, as this term is understood in the developmental and patristic theology.
- c) In addition, the faithful must receive a benefit from this, and be conscious that they do not “perform” the Mystery during the Divine Liturgy along with the celebrant, but participate in it. The first point of view, as a belief, and concept, is purely a Protestant understanding, and practice, which diminishes the “hierarchal nature”, and the “hierarchy” of the Church, as well as the distinction of the charismatic gifts. Precisely, this can occur unconsciously, and become fixed within the People of God, as a result of an unreasonable reading of the prayers “audibly”, or “loudly”.

d) The reading of prayers “in a normal voice”, and not “in a whisper”, as they are commonly read in today’s practice, permits the faithful the opportunity to follow, and be aware of the sequential variations of the prayers, and the exclamations, and the canonical structure of the Divine liturgy, which frequently “displaces” the prayer from its place in connection with the read, and sung context. (Circular Letter of the Sacred Synod N 2683 of 8.11.1999).

e) This directive for the “normal” reading of the prayers, in addition to everything stated above, would protect the priests from carelessness, or an inattentive reading of the prayers, or a mechanical recitation, or a scanning of them “with the eye”. The faithful would be helped to understand that, during the Divine Liturgy, the priest is not reciting certain magical phrases, but performs, and offers on their behalf, “prayers, petitions, and bloodless sacrifices” for the fulness of the whole Church.

f) Finally, it is characteristic that the publishing organization “Apostoliki Diakonia” of the Church of Greece, following the approval of our Holy Synod, and the recent report of His Beatitude Metropolitan Dionysios of Servion and Kozani, has, in the recent past, published the prayers, and exclamations in the appropriate liturgical editions, in accordance with the ancient, and correct tradition of the Church (Hierarch’s Ordinal and Priest’s Service Book), omitting the term “secretly”, and substituting “normal voice”.

Having this in mind we call upon you to recommend to the presbyters in your Holy Metropolises to serve “With the fear of God, in faith”, and special reverence, and to encourage the conscious participation of the faithful in the services, as well as by reading the prayers “in a normal voice”, dispensing with all formalism, and pietistic expressions, and structures, as well as any kind of sacramentalistic manifestations, and signs of “theatrics”, making the effort primarily, to point to the Eschatological Holy Table of the Kingdom of God, that is, to the “Holy Communion”. “