

Eschatological Ecclesiology and the Eucharistic Concept of *metabole* (St. John of Damascus)

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Abstract: *In this article the author aims to venture forth an idea that intertwines the eucharistic implications in an eschatological and ecclesiological key, basing his formulations on St. John of Damascus' concept of organological terminology in the interpretation of the Church and her service. This aims to provide further development to the basic ecclesiological ideas, developed during the XXth century and to provide a way forward. The basic concept of metabole is then extrapolated and juxtaposed along the patristic tradition and articulated as a neglected but necessary way of continuing forward.*

Key words: *ecclesiology, Eucharist, eschatology, organological, metabole*

In this paper¹ I would like to propose a perspective to the eschatological and ecclesiological significance of the Eucharist, that I call “organological”, as it puts forth the concept of “body” as a criterion. Following prof. Petros Vassiliadis' conception of Eschatological Ecclesiology² I will try to introduce into this ecclesiology the concept of *metabole*, as defined by St. John of Damascus in *Expositio Fidei*,³ understood in the broader context of the Divine Liturgy and Eucharistic Ecclesiology. I will try to grasp this concept of *metabole* as a border criterion and medium between Christology and Pneumatology, that could eventually reveal to us the Church as an eschatological Body of Christ in another way that leads to anthropology.

The problem of Eucharistic Ecclesiology, the lack of a synthesis between the historical and the eschatological aspect, universality, and catholicity, etc., could be resolved in Eschatological Ecclesiology, according to prof. Vassiliadis, through a synthesis between the Christological and Pneumatological approaches. That is why I find useful the medium category of “body” and would like to propose the concept of *metabole* as another aspect of the distinguished organological metaphor of St. Paul (1 Cor. 10:12), which is fundamental to Eucharistic Ecclesiology. In this way I will try to demonstrate another eschatological aspect of Eucharistic Ecclesiology, that shows potential for a synthesis and could eventually add details to the explication of Eschatological Ecclesiology.

The organological metaphor and the double use of the concept “Body of Christ” – as Eucharistic bread and local church community – is a fundamental point of Eucharistic Ecclesiology that provides, according to Affanasiev,⁴ the eucharistic

1 This paper was a part of the International Association of Orthodox Dogmatic Theologians Symposium, held in Balamand, Lebanon in 2018.

2 Vassiliadis, P., “Eschatological Ecclesiology: Beyond the Conventional Eucharistic Ecclesiology”, accessible online at: <http://users.auth.gr/pv/2005/2.doc>. [last accessed: 10.04.2018] Originally published as „Эсхатологическая эклезиология: выходя за пределы евхаристической эклезиологии” – in: Эсхатологическое учение Церкви (Богословская Конференция Русской Православной Церкви Эсхатологическое учение Церкви, Москва, 14-17.11.2005 г), Moscow 2007, pp. 89-101

3 *Expositio Fidei orthodoxae*, IV, 13, PG 94:1136-1154.

4 Afanasiev, N. *Two ideas of the Universal Church*. (in Russian), *Put*, 45, 1934, pp. 16-29.

equivalence of every local church, compared to another. Every local church is truly and completely the Body of Christ, as the same eucharistic bread is placed on every Holy Alter. Together with the ancient eucharistic prayer from the *Didache* (IX, 3-4) they form an eucharistic model of the catholicity of the Church, implementing the relation between the One and the many in eschatological terms:

We give thee thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge which thou didst make known to us through Jesus thy Child. To thee be glory forever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom, for thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.

This eschatological layer suggests a path that I would like to follow here. Instead of regarding this eschatological Kingdom in an abstract way, as we often do, it should instead be perceived as a real living Body:

“Μετανοεῖτε, ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν” - “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2) - this is the Kingdom revealed at the river Jordan in the Body of the Chosen One, the Son of Man, the eschatological Messiah, Who would gather into one the scattered children of God (cf. John 11:51-52).

The Kingdom is a Body (“for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you”, Luke 17:21) and this Body is a domain and the Kingdom of the King, chrismated by the Holy Spirit. That Body of Christ is given “for the life of the world” as a Corporate One, that has the potential to accept in Himself the many, growing as *oikonomia* of salvation. That Kingdom-Body was mystically incarnated at Bethlehem, revealed through the baptism in the Jordan, sacrificed on Golgotha, resurrected and ascended in the Glory of the Father, and then – given back to us as an *ecclesia* on the day of Pentecost and yet still fulfilling its *pleroma* in the Divine Liturgy until the Eschaton – always by the grace and the chrismating descent of the Holy Spirit!

This vision has a lot in common with the concept of *metabole* and the way that St. John of Damascus defines the convergence or the supernatural change of the Holy Gifts in the Eucharist. He makes an organic analogy with actual meals, the acceptance of food in the human body. The body of Christ is *homoousios* to ours, he says. At the Mystical Supper, the bread and wine have become the Body of Christ in a natural manner, because He consumed them, and the elements have been converted into blood and flesh in a “metabolic” (!) way – becoming a part of His Body. In the Liturgy, as hinted at above, in and through the Holy Spirit, we obtain the same – the bread and wine (and water) of the *prothesis*, being iconic copies (*ἀντίτυπα* - as they are called in St. Basil’s Liturgy), through the *epiclesis* and the descent (*ἐπιφοιτήσεως*) of the Holy Spirit supernaturally convert into the Body and Blood of Christ. Then we are invisibly sitting at the altar Table around Christ, Who even now drinks with us “the fruit of the vine”.⁵ This Eucharist, however, is no more accomplished in the here-and-now historical

⁵ Cf. the Prayer of the Communion: “Hearken, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, from Your holy dwelling place and from the throne of glory of Your Kingdom, and come to sanctify us, You Who are enthroned with the Father on high and are present among us invisibly here. And with Your mighty hand, grant Communion of Your most pure Body and precious Blood to us, and through us to all the people”.

dimension, but in the Eschaton, in the aeon of the Kingdom⁶ – as Our Lord says “For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come” (Luke 22:18). In this way, just before the Sacrifice of Golgotha is fulfilled in our world, Our Savior defines the “code” and the “formula” of communion with Him – the mystical and eucharistic meal. Pentecost completes the sacrament, that has been already come to pass at the Passover, the Mystical Supper, and the Eucharist as a communion with Christ is possible in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This Pneumatological aspect is quite important here and it reveals the eschatological aspect of the Eucharist. St. John of Damascus makes a distinction in his text between the natural organic transformation – *metabole* – and the supernatural convergence, called μεταποιήσις.⁷ He stresses the fact that the Holy Gifts after the descend of the Holy Spirit become a new creation, a spiritual Body of Christ,⁸ a New Pascha, belonging to the Never-ending Day.⁹

Although using different words, the Damascene illustrates the supernatural (the μεταποιήσις) through the natural one (μεταβολή). This is the reason why I have chosen here *metabole* as a key concept and an organic illustration of the eucharistic conversion. Even – the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom uses the same term at the very moment of the consecration of the Holy Gifts:

Μεταβαλὼν τῶ Πνεύματί σου τῶ Ἁγίῳ / *Changing them by Your Holy Spirit...*

On another it is critical to notice that the invocation (*epiclesis*) of the Holy Spirit is not addressed only to the Holy Gifts, but to all gathered as well: “Once again we offer to You this spiritual worship without the shedding of blood, and we beseech and pray and entreat You: Send down Your Holy Spirit upon us and upon the gifts here presented.” This sanctification and receiving grace is necessary in order to be able to partake in the communion, the *κοινωνία*.

We should not, however, be tempted to think of this supernatural conversion in a strictly linear way – as a part of the temporal continuum of this world. This is the error of the scholastic Eucharistic theology, related to Thomas Aquinas' theory of *transsubstantiatio* of the gifts, defined through Aristotelian categories of *substantia* and *accidentia*.¹⁰ *Transsubstantiatio*, the change of substances, invoked by the words of the priest, who is acting *in persona Christi*, proposes some liturgical immanentism, that could do little in the way of avoiding the idea, that the substantial change is done in a certain moment of our historical age, the chronological aeon, leaving no room for eschatology. St. John's idea of *metabole*, defended as well by St. Mark of Ephesus at the Council of Ferrara and Florence (XV c.),¹¹ suggests quite a different interpretation of the

⁶ cf. bishop David (Perovic), “Protopresbyter Nikolai Afanasiev’s seeing the mystery of the Church (a tribute to father Nikolai Afanasiev)” (serbian) in *Τεολογικόν III* (Annual of the Center for Systematic Theology, University of Veliko Turnovo), BT 2014

⁷ *Expositio* IV, 13, PG 94:1145A

⁸ *Expositio* IV, 13, PG 94:1152B, cf. 1 Cor. 15:44; 2 Cor. 5:16

⁹ ... ἐν τῇ Ἀνεσπέρω ἡμέρᾳ τῆς βασιλείας σου, Paschal Canon, ode nine, *Anthologia Graeca Carminum Christianorum*, p. 221

¹⁰ *Summa Theologiae* III, 75 (4), 76

¹¹ cf. arch. Amvrossiy Pogodin, *St. Mark of Ephesus and the Union of Florence* (“Святой Марк Эфесский и Флорентийская уния“), Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N. Y. 1963. Prot. S. Bulgakov

Eucharistic conversion, connected with the vision of Christ as the New Pascha, as it is seen in Damascenus' Paschal Canon as well.

Communion with the New Pascha is an interchange of gifts, made possible by a synthesis and *perichoresis* of two non-convergent realities, two aeons. These two aeons are actually crossing each other in the *kairos* of the Divine Liturgy as a personal meeting with the Resurrected Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit. This liturgical and Pneumatological *kairos* is a hypostatic presence, catholic time and chronotope of the Kingdom come, time of synergy and meeting, that makes the interchange and participation of one aeon (the historical) into the other (eschatological). The Body of Christ, then, is the border of these two aeons.

In the created world there is a *kairos*, which is a place and time for meeting Christ - the liturgical *synaxis*. It is the Divine Liturgy that could be seen as a conjunction or a convergence of the two worlds in a new transition and Passover, a new Pascha – a metamorphosis of time itself and a foretaste of eternity, a relation between the liturgical *now* and the Eschaton, between this aeon and the future one, where the future age is present and the Eight Day that never ends is foretasted.

It is the iconic aspect of the Sacrament, that is pointing to the eschatological reality of the Kingdom. The sacrament is prefigured in the Old Testament by Melchizedek; in the *prothesis* of the Divine Liturgy we *iconize* the sacrament, which is then fulfilled and completed in the *epiclesis*. The descent of the Holy Spirit reveals the new creation of the eschatological being, that is iconized – as in the waters of Jordan the Heavenly Kingdom is revealed in the Body of the Messiah, but this time – in the Resurrected One, the Last One (cf. Revelation 1:10), the New Pascha, the High Priest and the Sacrifice. According to St. John the Eucharistic bread is the beginning, in our age, of the Future Bread – the ἐπιούσιον eschatological Divine and Spiritual Communion, the φάρμακον ἀθανασίας¹²

St. John of Damascus reveals the eschatological presence of the Body of Christ in one more aspect, concerning our partaking and communion in an unworthy manner. The Body and Blood of Christ enter the constitution of our souls and bodies as a cleansing fire that burns everything unclean – a fiery ordeal and judgement, a foretaste of the eternal one – a preliminary *Parousia*, testifying to the eschatological presence of the Resurrected Messiah in the Eucharist.

It is the descent of the Holy Spirit that makes possible our partaking in the mystery of Communion, the *koinonía*. The Spiritual *μεταβολή* of the Great Ecclesial Body makes possible all other *meta*-s: the acceptance (*μεταλαμβάνω*) of the heavenly fruit of the Vine and the Divine burning coal; the partaking (*μετέχω*) of the Divinity of the King of the Eschaton – the participation (*μετάληψις*) of the Highest Mystery¹³.

The eschatological model of the Church and the Eucharist proposes a missionary ethos and a call for diaconia based on the *kenosis* and the *oikonomia*. We are

compares the doctrine of transsubstantiation with the Orthodox tradition in his article “Eucharistic dogma” - „Евхаристический догмат“ in "Путь" №20.

¹² Cf. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Ephesios* 20:2.

¹³ cf. PG 94:1153A-C

called (*καλλεῖν*) to respond (*ἐκκαλεῖν*) by partaking in the kenotic descent of the Son and the Holy Spirit in a missionary and diaconic witness to the world, which seems the only authentic way to become a real ecclesia – in this world, but not of this world. Kindled by the Pentecostal fiery tongues one should not fear this *saeculum* by separating and staying isolated from it, as this is the only way to deprive the world, and ourselves too, from this eschatological “metabolism” and identity. For it is the everlasting and yet-to-be-fulfilled Body of Christ, whose Head is in the Eschaton, that is putting the yeast in the dough of this world and bringing the oneness of the Triune God into it.

„Eschatological Ecclesiology and the Eucharistic Concept of *metabole* (St. John of Damascus)”,
Astra Salvensis, X (2022), no. 20, p. 65-70.