

On the Ecclesiastical Mystagogy

St. Maximus the Confessor

On the Symbolism that Has Been Established for the Rites that are Performed by the Holy Church at the Divine Synaxis. To Lord Theocharistos,¹ Maximus the humble monk: The divine proverb says, “a wise man” becomes “wiser” when he receives “an opportunity,” and “a righteous man” when he knows “will continue to receive knowledge,”² and, by your experience, most honorable of all to me, you clearly showed this to be true, teaching by action what the divine word wisely intimates. You once listened to me relating in a cursory and summary fashion—such as it was—the contemplations of another esteemed elder, who is truly wise in divine things concerning both the holy Church and the divine synaxis that is performed in her. Since the contemplations were beautiful and mystical and, above all, valuable for teaching, you pleaded with me to draft for you a written exposition of these rites from the synaxis. You wished to have this book as a “remedy against forgetfulness”³ and an aid to memory, saying that time naturally overpowers the memory and can imperceptibly through forgetfulness strip away and even completely obliterate the impressions and images of the beautiful things that are stored in the memory. For this reason, memory doubtless stands in need of a way⁴ of renewal by which the power of the written word continually abounds and by nature preserves the memory unchanged and undiminished. Everyone who is endowed with a little of the nobility of reason and is not completely estranged from intimacy with the word surely knows how much wiser it is to seek the indestructible permanence of that which is heard than simply to hear. But at first “the reason I was reluctant, for—I will speak the truth”⁵—I declined your proposal, beloved readers, was not because I did not wish to give you my thoughts in any way to the best of my ability, but because I have not partaken of the grace that leads those who are worthy into such an undertaking. Neither do I have experience in the art and practice of speaking, since I was educated rudely and am completely uninitiated in the craft of words—which possess merit in the delivery alone, in which the masses greatly delight, limiting their pleasure to the sound of the words, even if the words often contain nothing of the value of deep insight. But it would be nobler⁶ and truer to say that I was anxious lest, by the economy of our discourse, I should insult the majestic expression and intelligence of that blessed man concerning divine things. Nevertheless, at last yielding to the compulsion of love, which is stronger than all, I accepted your demand willingly. For, I would rather be laughed at by the critics for audacity and lack of education while being obedient than let it be supposed by my postponement that I do not wish to share in your eagerness for every good thing. As it says, “cast” your “anxieties”⁷ on God, the only one who works wonders and “teaches man knowledge,”⁸ who makes intelligible the “tongue of stammerers,”⁹ who finds a way “for those who are lost,”¹⁰ who “raises the poor one from the ground” and “lifts” the “needy one from” the “trash heap”¹¹—I am speaking of the fleshly thoughts and malodorous slime of the passions. And the poor one is the “poor in spirit”¹² or the one who is impoverished concerning evil and destitute of the habit according to it, or contrariwise, the poor one is the one who is still entangled in the law of the flesh and in the passions and, for this reason, impoverished and destitute of the grace according to virtue and knowledge. But since the symbols according to the sacred rite of the holy synaxis have been contemplated by the all-holy and truly God-revealing Dionysius the Areopagite, in a fashion

worthy of his expansive mind, in his treatise, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, one should know that the present discourse does not cover the same things, nor does it advance through the same things as his—for it would be audacity and arrogance and near insanity for those who are not able to attain to or comprehend him to attempt to emulate him and to present as their own the mysteries that were revealed by the inspiration through the Spirit to that one alone—but [the present discourse covers] as many things as are attainable¹³ to others and as in the benevolent will of God he omitted for the displaying and training of their habit concerning divine things according to their desire.¹⁴ When perceived through the divine things, the “radiant splendor”¹⁵ of the rites performed is made manifest to them in due measure, and it binds to itself those who are encompassed by longing “in order that” those who come after the blessed elder “should not be altogether idle”¹⁶ all the day of the time of the present life because they do not have a paid contract to work in the divine vineyard. This contract for spiritual work in the spiritual vineyard restores¹⁷ the spiritual denarius of the divine and most royal image¹⁸ that was stolen by the evil one in the beginning through deceit according to the transgression of the commandment. Now, I am not promising to recount all that which was contemplated mystically by the blessed elder, nor the same things that he said, as he perceived and said them. (For in order to become a lover of wisdom and a teacher of every discipline, he set himself free from the fetters of matter and its delusions by a superabundance of virtue and by the study of the divine things for a long time and in an expert fashion and by hard work. And consequently his mind was illuminated by the divine light, and so he was able to see by inspiration things that are invisible to the masses. And his discourse, like a mirror, undiminished by any stain of the passions, is a most accurate interpreter of that which he perceived, receiving in an untainted fashion the things that others were not able to perceive. And the discourse succeeds in conveying and saying things so that his hearers are able to see the whole thought communicated in the discourse and that all the things that he perceived are reflected purely in the whole thought and ferried across through the mediation of the discourse.)¹⁹ But whatever I hold in my memory and am able to perceive dimly and to speak even more dimly, nevertheless with reverence, yet I will speak by the grace of the God who illuminates the things that have been darkened. I do not suppose that you, who know how to discern rightly, think it necessary for me to be able to perceive or to speak otherwise than as I am able to perceive and speak and as the grace from above grants. This grace provides an ability that is properly accorded to me, even if the one who imparts and teaches you is ultimately the Most High, since it seems to me that to seek equal things from things that are unequal in virtue and knowledge would not be far from those who attempt to prove that the moon shines equally to the sun or those who force things that do not correspond to one another in any way to correspond in every way, although this is preposterous. Let God be the guide of the things that are perceived and spoken, for he is the only mind of those who perceive and of that which is perceived, and he is the only word of those who speak and of that which is spoken. He is the life of the living and of the things that have been endowed with life. On account of the very things that are and that are becoming, he is the one who is and the one who “becomes all things to all.”²⁰ But, on account of himself, he neither in any way whatsoever belongs to nor comes to belong to the things that are or that are becoming, whose essence he constitutes. He is by nature in the same class as absolutely nothing of the things that are, and for this reason, he allows us to say rather that he is not, because it is more properly said of him that he transcends being.²¹ For it is necessary, if we

are to know truly the difference between God and creatures, we must know that the negation of the things that are is the affirmation of the one who transcends being, and the affirmation of the things that are is the negation of the one who transcends being. And both designations can be reverently contemplated about him, yet neither is possible in a proper sense—I am speaking of the existence and non-existence of God. Both are possible in a proper sense: on the one hand, it can be affirmed that God is because he is the cause of the things that are, and, on the other hand, it can be completely negated that God is because of his superiority as cause of the things that are. And, again, neither is possible in a proper sense, because neither establishes the very essence and nature of what existence is concerning the one whom we seek. For nothing at all—whether it exists or does not exist—is united with him by nature because he is their cause; neither anything of the things that are and are spoken nor anything of the things that are not and are not spoken in any way comes near to him. For he has an existence that is simple and unknowable and inaccessible to everyone and that is completely indescribable and beyond every kataphatic and apophatic statement. This suffices for now. Let us proceed to the subject set before us in the discourse.

(2) How and in What Mode the Holy Church is the Image of the Universe, which Subsists in Visible and Invisible

intellectual and bodiless substance, and the realm that is sensible and bodily and which has been ingeniously interwoven⁴⁴ from many forms and natures, and which exists somehow as another Church that is made without hands—is seen in wisdom through this Church that is made with hands.⁴⁵ The universe possesses a sanctuary, which is the realm above and is assigned to the powers above, and it also possesses a nave, which is the realm below and is traversed by those whose lot it is to live through sense perception. Again, the universe is one, and it is not divided by its parts; conversely, it limits the difference of these parts in their particular natures by the reference to its own undivided unity. And these realms are alternately identical with the universe and are without confusion with one another. The universe demonstrates that the whole of each enters into the whole of the other, and both are the same whole:⁴⁶ as parts, the realms comprise one whole, and by itself as a whole, the realms are comprised of parts singly and wholly. For the whole intelligible realm, which is impressed mystically in symbolic forms in the whole sensible realm, appears for those who are able to see, and the whole sensible realm, which is intellectually simplified into its principles according to the mind, exists in the whole intelligible realm. For, the sensible realm is in the intelligible realm in the principles, and the intelligible realm is in the sensible realm in the representations. “And their construction was just as if a wheel was within a wheel,”⁴⁷ says Ezekiel, the marvelous seer of great visions, which I suppose he spoke concerning the two realms. And again, the divine apostle says: “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible attributes have been clearly seen and apprehended in the things that have been made.”⁴⁸ And if the things that do not appear “are clearly seen” through the things that appear,

as it is written, how much more will the things that appear be perceived through the things that do not appear by those who devote themselves to spiritual contemplation. For the contemplation of the symbols of the intelligible things through the things that are visible is spiritual knowledge and intelligence of the things that are seen through the things that are invisible. For it is necessary that things that signify one another possess entirely true and distinct reflections of one another and an unbroken relationship with these reflections. Realities As the second point of his contemplation, the blessed elder said that the holy Church of God is a representation and image of the entire universe, which subsists in visible and invisible realities, because the Church contains the same oneness and diversity as God. For, although the Church is one building according to its construction, she contains differences in the particularity of the physical layout. She is divided into the place designated for priests and ministers alone (which we call the sanctuary), and the place accessible for all the faithful people to enter (which we call the nave). But, again, the Church is one in substance. The Church is not divided by her parts on account of the difference of the parts themselves to one another, but rather she dissolves the differences in name of the parts themselves by her reference to the unity. She displays that both the sanctuary and the nave are identical to one another and illustrates that each one exists in the other according to exchange, although each one is established by itself. The nave is identical to the sanctuary according to power because it is consecrated by the anaphora⁴² at the consummation of the mystagogy and, conversely, the sanctuary is identical to the nave according to activity because it is the place where the never-ending mystagogy begins. The Church remains one and the same through both. In the same way, the entire universe of everything that is—which was brought forth from God at the creation and is divided into the intelligible realm,⁴³ which is comprised of through the things that do not appear by those who devote themselves to spiritual contemplation. For the contemplation of the symbols of the intelligible things through the things that are visible is spiritual knowledge and intelligence of the things that are seen through the things that are invisible. For it is necessary that things that signify one another possess entirely true and distinct reflections of one another and an unbroken relationship with these reflections.

(9) What is the Interpretation of the Entrance of the People into the Holy Church of God

The blessed elder said that the entrance of the people with the high priest into the Church signifies the conversion of the faithless from unbelief to faith and from ignorance and error to the acknowledgement of God and the transformation of the faithful from evil and an absence of discernment to virtue and knowledge. For the entrance into the Church indicates not only the conversion of the faithless to “the true” and “only God”¹³² but also the correction through repentance of each of us who believe but still disobey the commandments of the Lord through our undisciplined conduct and shameful lives. For any man, whether a murderer or an adulterer or a thief, whether “haughty,”¹³³ “boastful,” “insolent,” greedy, avaricious, “slandorous,” vengeful, inclined to anger and wrath, abusive, or an extortionist, whether defamatory, given to envy, or a drunkard—but, let me not prolong the discourse by enumerating all the forms of evil—simply any man who had been held by any sort of evil but voluntarily ceases to be held by its pursuit and to act according to its purpose and who changes his life for the better, choosing

virtue rather than evil—let such a man be properly and truly perceived and said to enter with Christ, our God and high-priest, into virtue, which is figuratively perceived to be the Church.

(10) What is the Symbolism of the Divine Readings

And the teacher said that the divine readings of the all-sacred books points towards the divine and blessed purposes and decrees of the all-holy God, through which each one of us receives “guidelines for living” in proportion to the power within us. We also learn the rules of the divine and blessed contests, and when we “compete according to the rules,” we are considered worthy of the victory-crowns of Christ’s kingdom.

(11) What is the Symbolism of the Divine Songs

And he said that the spiritual delight of the divine songs indicates the vivid pleasure of the divine good things, which both awakens the soul toward the pure and blessed love for God and stirs up a great hatred of sin.

(12) What the Pronouncements of Peace Signify And the wise man explains that the salutations of peace that come from within the sanctuary at the direction of the high-priest at each reading indicate the divine acceptance conveyed by the holy angels. God ordains through these angels the contests of those who “compete according to the rules” against the opposing powers, ending the invisible struggles and granting peace by the “bringing to nothing of the body.” In return for their toils for virtue and freedom from the passions, he gives grace to the saints in order that, now that they have abandoned warfare, they might transfer the powers of the soul to spiritual fruitfulness, which is the life of virtue. The saints dispel the hordes of evil spirits through these powers, with God the Word as their general, who brings to nothing the piercing and treacherous machinations of the devil. (13) What is the Specific Symbolism, in Each Instance, of the Reading of the Holy Gospel and the Mystical Rites that Follow Therefore, the sacred regulation of the holy Church legislates that the divine reading of the holy Gospel take place immediately after these things. Specifically, on the one hand, the reading introduces suffering for the sake of the word to the fervent. After the reading, the Word of spiritual contemplation—as the high priest—comes from heaven to dwell among the people¹⁴⁰ and brings to an end “the mind set on flesh”¹⁴¹—as the sensible realm—because, while the people are being instructed, [the Word] drives away from them the arguments that still bow¹⁴² towards the earth. And from there [the Word] leads them to the vision of the intelligible things through the closing of the doors and the entrance of the holy mysteries. [The Word] teaches unspeakable things to “those who have” now “shut out the sense perception” of speech and action “and have gone outside the flesh and the world.”¹⁴³ They are first reconciled through the kiss of peace with one another and also with him, and in gratitude they next proceed to the confession of thanks for their salvation in return for his great kindness toward them, which the divine symbol of faith¹⁴⁴ communicates mysteriously. Then [the Word] counts them among the angels through the Trisagion¹⁴⁵ and grants to them the same knowledge in ascribing holiness to God.¹⁴⁶ [The Word] brings them to God the Father¹⁴⁷ because they have been adopted in the Spirit through the prayer through which they are deemed worthy to call God “Father.” And from there, when by knowledge they have passed through all the principles in the things that exist, next [the Word] leads them to the

unknowable Monad in an unknowable way through the singing of the “One Is Holy.” And they are deified by grace and made like the undivided identity by participation with the Monad to the best of their ability.