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From Transubstantiation to Theosis:

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Eucharist in Italy, the USA, and Russia

### I. The Scriptural Mandate

The Eucharist stands as a two-thousand-year-old scriptural mandate; an enduring ritual that has survived empires and entropy, scandals and schisms, as well as the relentless march of modernity. At its core, the rite is rooted in Jesus' "Words of Institution" recorded in the Bible: "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19, KJV). While this sentence serves as a common root, its ritual expression across the globe is significantly refracted through specific cultural lenses: the Mediterranean Roman Catholic Tradition, American Protestant Individualism, and Slavic Orthodox Mysticism.

The Eucharist is not merely a localized religious duty but a transformative act that reflects the core cultural values of the community that celebrates it. As part of a "Wisdom Tradition" that focuses on practical transformation and personal realization, it bridges the gap between historical events and contemporary lived experience. This essay argues that the singular divine command of the Eucharist is refracted through the cultural prisms of Italy, the United States, and Russia, manifesting as vastly different theological and sociological realities. Through the analysis of primary sources, as well as the structural theories of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, and

alongside the mystical theology of Alexander Schmemmann, we can see how the bread and wine become a canvas upon which nations paint their deepest anxieties and highest hopes.

## II. Ritual as Bridge and Transformation

To understand the Eucharist's power, one must look to the anthropological structures of ritual. In their foundational work, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss define the rite of sacrifice as a mechanism that establishes a bridge between the "sacrificer" (the profane world) and the "divine" (the sacred world). They posit:

Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned (Hubert & Mauss 1964, 13).

In the Eucharist, the bread and wine serve as the intermediaries. Through the ritual, the profane elements are consecrated, and the participants are brought into a state of communion with the deity. This modification of the "moral person" is central to the diverse expressions we see globally (Hubert & Mauss 1964, 9). Furthermore, Maurice Bloch's theory of "Initiation" in *Prey into Hunter* suggests that ritual does not merely change a person's status, it transforms their nature. The participant enters the ritual as "prey" that is vulnerable to the forces of mortality and sin, and emerges as a "hunter" empowered by the spiritual vitality of the divine (Bloch 1992, 13). The Eucharist acts as this transformative initiation, however, the nature of what one is *initiated into* depends on the cultural framework.

### III. Italian Catholicism (Tradition and Continuity)

In Italy, the Eucharist is defined by the doctrine of Transubstantiation, as codified in the catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). The Church teaches that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ and of the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of his blood. This doctrine ensures that the Mass is viewed as a literal sacrifice, not merely as a symbolic representation. For the Italian cultural psyche, this provides a profound sense of historical continuity and communal stability. The Mediterranean tradition values the tangible and the incarnational, and the Eucharist is viewed as a physical miracle occurring within the local parish, anchoring the community to a two-thousand-year-old Roman heritage.

The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being (CCC 1997, para. 1325).

In the Italian context, the ritual serves as a social stabilizer. It is the “source and summit” of all Christian life, binding the family, the village, and the nation to the eternal through a physical medium. Just as the “accidents” of bread and wine mask an underlying divine reality, the rigid consistency of the ritual acts as a cultural anchor, satisfying a deep-seated longing for a permanent moral and social foundation.

#### IV. American Protestantism (Individualism and Personal Faith)

The United States offers a sharp contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition, defined by "American Individualism" and the "Free Church" (freedom from state control and centralized hierarchy) tradition. The American theological landscape is a broad spectrum, influenced heavily by the fractures of the 16th-century Reformation. As Carter Lindberg details in *The European Reformations*, the debate between Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli at the 1529 Marburg Colloquy set the stage for American pluralism. While Luther argued for a "Real Presence" (Lindberg 2010, 171-173) in the Eucharist, Zwingli championed "Memorialism" (Lindberg 2010, 173-175) as the idea that the bread and wine are strictly symbols. In the "Free Church" landscape of the US, the emphasis shifted from the objective power of the rite to the subjective faith of the individual.

The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith (Thirty-Nine Articles, Art. XXVIII).

This citation from the Episcopalian *Book of Common Prayer* (Episcopal Church 1979, art. 28), asserts that the efficacy of the sacrament is determined by the internal faith of the participant.

This reflects the broader American values of personal liberty and self-determination; the ritual is valid because the individual believes, rather than because of a physical change in the elements.

## V. Russian Orthodoxy (Slavic Mysticism and Theosis)

In stark contrast to both Roman Catholicism and American Protestantism, Russian Orthodoxy rejects both the legalistic categories of Roman Catholicism (Transubstantiation) and the symbolic reductions of the Reformation. Instead, it views the Eucharist through the lens of Theosis (divinization). Alexander Schmemmann, in *For the Life of the World*, argues that the Eucharist is a cosmic act intended to restore the world to its original purpose: communion with God.

The Liturgy is the journey of the Church into the dimension of the Kingdom...it is the manifestation of the Church as the new creation (Schmemmann, 1973).

In this view, the sacred and secular are not divided. The Eucharist is a "Mystery" (sacrament) that transforms the participant into a "divine-human" body. It is a cosmic event where the walls between heaven and earth become less opaque. Through the Russian cultural lens, the ritual is not a social stabilizer or a personal memory; it is an eschatological breakthrough that offers a taste of the world to come.

## VI. Synthesis & Conclusion

When we synthesize these perspectives, we can view the Eucharist as a cultural prism. Jesus' "Words of Institution" provide the *white light* of scriptural command, but the cultural context of the community ultimately determines the *color* that emerges. Italy offers the color of *Tradition* while focusing on the objective, substantial sacrifice that ensures communal and historical continuity. The United States manifests the varying colors of *Individualism* as it focuses on the subjective faith and the personal encounter of the believer within a pluralistic society. In Russia,

the color offered is that of a *Mysticism* which focuses on the cosmic transformation and the divinization of the human person.

## Annotated Bibliography

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D. Halls. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964. This foundational sociological text asserts that the Eucharist as sacrifice facilitates redemption and communion.

Lindberg, Carter. *The European Reformations*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Lindberg details the 16th-century theological fractures regarding Christ's presence in the Eucharist. This source explains the historical divergence that led to the diverse landscape of American Protestant views.

Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973. This text establishes the sacramental worldview of Eastern Orthodoxy as practiced in Russia and argues that the Eucharist is a cosmic act intended to restore the world to its original purpose, communion with God.