

THE EAST SYRIAN LITURGY AS AN EXPRESSION OF CHRISTOLOGY
-- With Special Attention to the Use of the “Exchange of Predicates” --
Chorbishop M.J. Birnie

INTRODUCTION

The question addressed in this paper is whether the Christology reflected in the liturgical prayers and anthems of the Church of the East expresses and nurtures a faith in the unitary person of the incarnate Logos, the Son of God. With attention to the axiom set forth by Celestine I, “The rule of prayer determines the rule of faith,” it will be demonstrated, through extracts from the various offices of the church as contained in the Order of the Hallowing of the Apostles and the Cycle of Offices and Propers, that the official prayers and anthems, when they deal with Christological themes, are directed to, or speak of, a single subject in the person of Christ, and nourish a faith in the undivided incarnate Word.

Since the initial “cause of scandal” which led to the first Council of Ephesus concerned the propriety of the use of the “exchange of predicates” between the divine and human natures of the person of Christ, it will be demonstrated through the above named sources that the exchange of predicates has a distinct place in the worship life of the faithful community of the Church of the East, notwithstanding the suspicion its use has occasioned in the church and among its theologians. The appearance of the “exchange” in these texts, and their long history without revision, testify to its acceptance by generations of worshippers in the church. And with Celestine’s axiom in mind, consideration will be given to the practical consequences this may have for the conceptualization of the worshipper as he visualizes the object of his worship.

The Exchange of Predicates

It is typical in liturgies of the Church of the East for prayers and anthems to be addressed to God or to the Lord God, including those that are addressed to Christ and contain Christological descriptive matter. The divine Logos, the Son of God (though not conceived apart from his humanity), is intended as the one to whom those prayers and anthems are addressed. And though the exchange of predicates is seldom employed directly to express the unitary person of Christ, its use has acquired a qualified synodical approval, that is, it may be employed *occasionally*“ and *by way of the economy*”¹. This official qualified acceptance of the propriety and practical use of the exchange is evidence that the Church of the East finds it useful as a legitimate, if sometimes controversial, means of

¹ *Synodicon Orientale*, ed. J. B. Chabot, (Syr. text) p. 136.

on earth . . . *Who by his birth (or epiphany, etc.) gladdened the earth and cheered the heavens . . . To whom immortality belongs naturally, and who dwells in gladsome light . . .*

The sequential petitions which begin, “who by his birth, etc.” and “to whom immortality belongs naturally”, address their antecedent, “merciful God”, as the subject appropriate to both descriptions, and generations of worshippers in the Church of the East have comfortably and piously joined their voices and sentiments to them without compunction. An intellectual distinction of the divine and human natures of the “merciful God” to whom they make petition is possible, of course, as it is in any use of the exchange of predicates, but this is not, I believe, very likely to happen in the course of common prayer.

But it is not only in Marian references or in the above-named deacon’s litany that the Church of the East makes use of the exchange of predicates, but also in other Sacramental contexts. In the Anthem of the Bema⁴ for Epiphany we find this example:

Through water and the Spirit we have been sanctified; *by your body and blood* we have gained life. *O Good One who fashioned us from dust*, you renewed our image through water and the Spirit; through water and the Spirit you fashioned us anew. Glorious is your renewal, and lovely is your coming.⁵

The words “your body and blood” can have no other referent than the “Good One who fashioned us from the dust.” And here, as above, the subject of address is the second person of the Holy Trinity, incarnate in the manhood he took from us. The adoration is of the Word made flesh who gave us his own sanctifying body and blood, not another’s.

The evocative power of the singing of the Anthem of the Bema is significant in its formative influence on the worshippers’ faith and conceptualization. The familiar tunes and rhythms of these relatively short and easily remembered hymns aid in fixing them in the memory of the worshipper, who is apt to sing them at home and at work as well as in church and, in times past, to understand and assimilate their message as well⁶. On the memorial of St.

⁴ An anthem sung at the time of the reception of the Sacrament during the Eucharist.

⁵ *Khudra*, p. 424.

⁶ The modern Assyrians’ lack of understanding of the classical Syriac language is a barrier to understanding and a problem yet to be addressed.

The Son of God is called “Christ”, both according to the series of [divine] names which we previously set down above . . . and according to the name which Gabriel ordained beforehand for him, that is, “Jesus,” which indicates the special title of his human *qnoma* in the Union, which was taken from the nature of the blessed [and] holy Virgin, Mary. . . . Although this name Jesus, “Savior,” makes known what he is going to become, yet it is the name of the *qnoma* of his manhood.¹³

This standard explanation, applying the name “Jesus” to the human nature of Christ, makes it all the more noteworthy that the address to *Jesus* should describe him as *the Effulgence of the eternal Father, begotten without beginning beyond times and origins, and the Creator*. Thus, while the previous examples I have given ascribe human attributes to the Godhead in the economy, here the reverse takes place, as the properties of the divine Word are referred to the “human” name, Jesus. A unitary subject is contemplated, here under the *name* of his manhood. Both the human nature and the name which it bears belong to the subject of the Incarnation, the divine Word, the “Effulgence of the eternal Father”.

The Language of Prayer and Praise, and the Faith It Expresses or Evokes

The language of prayer and praise is formative in the worshipper, both through the images and sentiments it evokes, and through the faith it builds upon and reinforces by its repeated expression. In the liturgies of the Church of the East, in prayers specifically addressed to God or the Lord God, where Christ is meant, the language employed to describe his human experiences directs the worshipper’s mind to the Deity as antecedent. The subject of those experiences is conceptualized as *one* and not as *one and another*. Whatever “duality” may emerge in the course of polemic discussion or theoretical contemplation disappears in hymnic wonder and prayerful certitude in the Assyrian Christian as he, in his ordinary worship, addresses his Lord and God, the Word become flesh. The *relationship* thus conceived and acknowledged between worshipper and Worshipped is *one to one*. The suggestion of an internal, independent relationship of the divine nature to the human in the united Christ is absent from the worshipper’s adoration, who acknowledges only the ontic unity which the Incarnate One is perceived to be in his person and in his relationship to his people.

¹³ CSCO, “Book on the Union,” Paris, 1915, ed. A. Vaschalde, pp. 208, lines 25-26, 28-31; 209, lines 11-13.

To approach the divine Son of God through the veil of his flesh; to honor his mother because of the relationship of his flesh to hers, and therefore his own relationship to her; to adore him and receive him intimately through the mediating elements of the sacraments—*his own* body and blood—these acts of devotion, through cumulative effect on the worshipper, leave not the slightest room for separation to be contemplated, either by implication or through inference, in the unique and absolute union of humanity and divinity in the person of Christ. The language of worship and adoration in the liturgies of the Church of the East does not lead the worshipper to conceptualize a human person existing by himself in relationship with the Logos. The personal identity of the complete and undiminished manhood taken by the Logos is that of the eternal Son of God, “begotten without beginning beyond times and origins”, who is the sole object of petition and praise. Like the worship of his Christian brothers and sisters who have been taught to confess the union in philosophical terms foreign or suspicious to him (or to his ancestors), his own worship is of the *one* Son of God incarnate, both Suffering Servant and King of Glory.