



# Investigating the Holy Eucharist and the term 'people of God' according to the Eastern Orthodox Church

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## Abstract

This article unpacks aspects of the Eucharist and how it is understood in various churches using a literature study methodology. It also looks at the notion of the "people of God". The Greek word εὐχαριστία (eucharistia), means "thanksgiving", appears fifteen times in the New Testament and is a critical aspect of the Christian faith. The weekly celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday's is an requisite activity of the Church because the Eucharist establishes the Church as the Body of Christ. The Eucharistic celebration is also known as the Divine Liturgy and is believed to impart the actual Body and Blood of Christ to the faithful. In the act of communion, the entire Church, those past, present, and even forthcoming are unified in eternity. It is the source of her life, the superlative act of her thanksgiving and of her sacrifice of praise to the creator God. The Holy Eucharist is the very core of Christian life, and the means by which each believer is nourished by God's grace and tender mercy. At the Divine Liturgy, the Church is continuously changed from a human community into the Body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the holy People of God.

**Keywords:** Eucharistic meal, Ekklesia, People of God, doctrine, beliefs.

## Introduction

The term holy *Eucharistia* (thanksgiving) appears in the three synoptic gospels, Mark 14:22–25, Matthew 26:26–29 and Luke 22:13–20, and it depicts Jesus as presiding over the Last Supper preceding his crucifixion. It is that by which the rite of holy communion is denoted (LaVerdiere, 1996) as it was in the Didache of the late 1<sup>st</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century which was an early Church discourse that comprises instructions for Baptism and also the Eucharist. (Milavec, 2003). It was also a term coined by Ignatius of Antioch who refers to the Eucharist as "the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ and also Justin Martyr (Guy, 2011), who states it is far more than a mere meal: "the food over which the prayer of thanksgiving, the word received from Christ, has been said ... is the flesh and blood of this Jesus who became flesh ... and the deacons carry some to those who are absent" (Justin Martyr First Apology, 65–67).

The "Eucharist" is maintained as the name in various churches including inter- alia the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic (Catholic Church, 2006), Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches. Most of the Protestant denominations refer to it as either "Communion", "the Lord's Supper", "Remembrance", or "the Breaking of Bread" (Armstrong, 2009). For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks (εὐχαριστήσας), he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me". (1 Corinthians 11:23–24). The rite of baptism and the Lord's Supper (as it is celebrated in the Holy Eucharistic communion) are those symbols that depict entry into God's kingdom and which make those who celebrate them the 'people of God' (Bradshaw & Maxwell, 2012; Neal, 2014). Therefore, all those who participate in the Holy Eucharist, regarding it as a ritual in which they share in the body of Christ as part of a united body, by means of which the church can realise its fullness, are



'people of God' (Vassiliades 1988). The Lord's Supper, is referred to in Hellenistic Greek as Κυριακὸν δεῖπνον (Kyriakon deipnon), was in use in the early church during the 1st century,[12][14] and was witnessed to in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (11:20–21) (LaVerdiere,1996).

The term Communion was used to refer to the Eucharistic rite and was started by groups originating in the Protestant Reformation. The term Communion is derived from Latin *communio* ("sharing in common"), which translates Greek *κοινωνία* (*koinōnía*) in 1 Corinthians 10:16: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? Evangelicals including Baptists and Pentecostals refer to the rite as an ordinance rather than a sacrament (Stephenson, 2012) However the Holy Eucharist is also known as Holy Communion and the Lord's Supper is considered to be a sacrament in most churches, and as an regulation in others. This important rite was instituted by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper when he gave his disciples bread and wine during a Passover meal, Jesus commanded his disciples to "do this in memory of me" while referring to the bread as "my body" and the cup of wine as "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).

The phrase 'breaking of bread' κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου (*klasis tou artou*) in liturgical Greek also ἄρτοκλασία *artoklasia*) appears in several associated forms in the New Testament (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42, 2:46, 20:7 and 20:11).

It is often referred to as the "Blessed Sacrament", the "Sacrament of the Altar" by Catholics (Higgins, 2018), Lutherans (Kellerman, 2017). and some Anglicans (Anglo-Catholics) (Prestige, 1927) to refer to the sacred consecrated elements. The eucharist allows all Christians to recall both Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross and his commission of the apostles at the Last Supper. As church members, of one and the same body, the 'people of God' are united with one another and with the divine head of the body, by means of divine grace, which is apparent in their new life in Jesus Christ. It is by means of such grace that they live a new existence, which is spent in continuous communion (*koinonia*) with the triune Godhead. In such a way, they become 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (1 Peter 2:9).

The New Covenant of Jesus with the 'people of God' was based upon his sacrificial death:

*And when he had taken some bread and given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise he took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you.'* (Luke 22:19–20)

The Last Supper appears in each of the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke and is also found in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. It is thus clear that early Christians celebrated what Paul the Apostle referred to as the Lord's Supper. The Eastern Orthodox and also the Roman Catholics believe that the substances of bread and wine essentially become the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ through a process of transubstantiation so that the appearance of the elements remain. The Lutherans on the other hand, have faith in the notion that the true body and blood of Christ are really present "in, with, and under" the forms of the bread and wine in what is a sacramental union (Mattox & Roeber, 2012). The Anglican Church in its eucharistic theology uphold the idea that the eucharist is the real presence of the Lord, however Evangelical Anglicans believe that this is a mere spiritual presence, and Anglo-Catholics maintain the idea of it being a corporeal presence (Poulson, 1999).



The Eucharist is a key rite of Christian worship and all Christians agree that it is a memorial action in which, by eating bread and drinking wine (or as in Protestantism, grape juice or water), the church reminiscence what Jesus Christ represents and said and did (Macy, 2005). There is also harmony in that participation in the Holy Eucharist augments and deepens the communion of believers with Christ and also with fellow adherents. The differences in understanding however mean that the Holy Eucharist, which was intended as both a symbol of and a means of nurturing unity inside the church, has been a basis of disagreement and even argument. Thus while the various Christian traditions teach that Jesus is indeed present in the Eucharist in some distinct way, they disagree about the nature, position, and time of that presence. In some traditions the Eucharist is only emblematic or a memorial of Christ. The term Divine Liturgy (Greek: Θεία Λειτουργία) is commonly used in the Byzantine Rite traditions. They also refer to it as a "Divine Mysteries", especially when speaking of the consecrated elements, which they also term as "the Holy Gifts" (Nicolaidis, 2010).

### **The Eastern Orthodox approach**

As stated earlier, in Eastern Christianity, the Eucharistic service is termed the Divine Liturgy. It consists of two main divisions: the first is the Liturgy of the Catechumens which consists of introductory litanies, antiphons and scripture readings, concluding in a reading from one of the Gospels and a homily; the second is the Liturgy of the Faithful in which the Eucharist is offered, consecrated, and received as Holy Communion. The special Eucharistic prayer is called the anaphora, meaning "offering" or "carrying up" (ἀνα- + φέρω). In the Eastern Rite of Constantinople, two diverse anaphoras are used: one is the liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, the other is that of Saint Basil the Great. At the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Spirit comes upon the holy Gifts which are the bread and wine of the Eucharist and changes them into the Body and Blood of Christ. God graciously accepts the bread and wine offering and in return He gives us His own Son, who acts to make us His own Body. Jesus nourishes us with His own glorified flesh and makes us partakers of divine life. Christ, who is the Bread of Life, changes and transmutes us who feed on Him in faith and integrates us to Himself, as He promised, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him (John 6: 56).

The Anaphora of Saint John Chrysostom is used on most days of the year while that of Saint Basil's is presented on the Sundays of Great Lent, the eves of Christmas and Theophany, Holy Thursday, Holy Saturday, and upon his feast day (1 January). At the end of the Anaphora in the Greek Orthodox Church the bread and wine are considered to be the actual Body and Blood of Christ. Leavened bread, is used with the leaven signifying the presence of the Holy Spirit (Runciman, 1968). It is believed that the elements of bread and wine are changed during the invocation or Epiclesis by which the Holy Spirit is invoked and the consecration of the bread and wine as the true and genuine Body and Blood of Christ is explicitly entreated. (Schmemmann, 1997).

Saint Justin Martyr (150 CE) wrote concerning the Holy Eucharist "of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined" (Justin Martyr, The First Apology, Chapter 66). Catechumens (those still undergoing instruction and who have not yet been baptized) are requested to exit the main body of the church before the sacramental part of the liturgy/ This has led to the "Mass of the Catechumens" and the exclamation by the deacon or priest, "The doors! The doors!", just before recitation of the Nicene Creed. In the Eucharist, we pass uninterruptedly from death to life and find God Himself. By partaking of Holy Communion divine life flows into us and infiltrates our humanity. The future life is permeated and merged into the present one. St.



Ignatios of Antioch states that the Eucharist is “the medicine of immortality and the antidote against death, enabling us to live forever in Jesus Christ.” In Christ we become gods by grace.

The Eastern Orthodox church requires its members to observe fasts (most weeks, this will be at least Wednesday and Friday) for the week preceding partaking of communion, and to fast from all food and water from midnight the night before. Orthodox Christians are also to have made a recent confession to a priest before coming to the Eucharist.

Preceding Holy Communion it is not indispensable for one to fast more than the fast established by the Church (Wednesdays, Fridays, Lent and other fasting periods and days.) Holy Communion is a utmost necessity nourishment for an Orthodox believer’s spiritual life as it completes communion with God in the future Kingdom of Heaven. Those taking Holy Communion need to examine themselves as directed by the Apostle Paul: "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself not discerning the Lord's body" (Corinthians 11:28-29).

After careful self-examination the believer may find he or she is guilty of sins which prevent them taking Holy Communion, then confession is required and with contrition of heart sins must be confessed. When taking Holy Communion, we need to have true love for people which is proof of one's love for God who is love. John, in his first Epistle says "We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also" (1 John 4:19-21). One also needs to reconcile with one’s adversaries with whom one does not have a good relationship. "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Holy Communion must be taken in a sense of fear and awe. The priest, holding the Holy Chalice, invites the believers: "With fear of God, faith, and love, draw near" and the faithful must come to the Holy Chalice in silence and contemplation.

### **The People of God - *Laos tou Theou***

In terms of Orthodox faith, each of the members of the church, as the *Laos tou Theou*, share in each of the prophetic, high priestly and royal offices of Christ. Through divine grace, they become the communicants of all the blessings of the divine glory. They are all able to live out the fullness of God’s truth in the *Ekklesia*, as well as to live out the experience of the variety of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the sacramental life (*mystiriake zoe*) of the church (Limouris 1992). The early church fathers all accepted the message that is contained in the Old Testament as a precursor to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. All of those sacrifices that feature in the Old Testament are regarded as a prefiguration of the good news (*evangelion*) and of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ at Golgotha. The *Laos tou Theou* are a ‘peculiar people’ (Titus 2:14), who are characterised by their Christian belief. They are essentially a mystical body, who are inspired by the *energeia* (energy) of the Holy Spirit, and who fall under the headship of Jesus Christ (Theodorou 1982). People were not made to be of God by the old Mosaic covenant. They were made the *Laos tou Theou* by means of the New Covenant, to which the prophet Jeremiah refers in the Old Testament:

*'Behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,' declares the Lord. 'But this is the covenant*



*which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'. (Jeremiah 31:31–33)*

The identity of the 'people of God' as the elect, or as those who are called by God, is made manifest in the *koinonia* (fellowship) which they share with Jesus Christ. The *Ekklesia* church, as that of the 'people of God', continues to offer protection and to strive to perpetuate the faith of the one true God in the world.

Those who wish to be numbered among God's people must first receive Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour:

*Jesus therefore said to them again, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture ... I am the good shepherd; and I know my own, and my own know me, even as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd'. (John 10:7–9, 14–16)*

The New Testament is a consummation of the Old Testament. Jesus is the Messiah who is spoken of by the prophets, and it is in him that all promises and expectations are fulfilled. The law of the Old Testament and the Gospel belong together as a unity. Those who do not recognise Jesus as the Messiah betray the old dispensation. Jesus' life of total service, as well as his death and resurrection, are the basis of a new community, which is erected on an ongoing basis by listening to the good news of the Gospel and by appreciating the special gifts of the sacraments by means of participating in them. Belonging to the church implies living in total communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit (BEM, 1982). In the Lord's Prayer, the word *epiousios* has been interpreted by some as meaning "super-substantial", a reference to the Bread of Life, the Holy Eucharist.

### **The people of God and unity**

The idea of the oneness of all of humanity is a central teaching in the Orthodox Christian faith. In terms of such faith, St Basil the Great explains that all people are related and that all are brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*), who come from the one Father who made everything (Vasiliades 1978, Nicolaidis, 2010, 2014). St Irenaeus stresses that the *pleroma* (fullness) of the church, which consists of the holy 'people of God', is received at baptism, in order to preserve the 'rule of truth' (*kanona tes aletheias*). By receiving such baptism, the 'people of God' become the custodians of the truth (Horton, 2008).

The emphasis of Orthodox theology is on communion; the centrality of the ritual is manifested in the church in the form of Eucharistic communion. In the new Israel, the *Laos tou Theou*, including all of humanity who accept Christ, are incorporated into the one body of Christ. The formerly distinct groups which coexist in harmony in the *Ekklesia* form the body of Christ. Yves Congar (1969) described the *Ekklesia* as '*the community of the faithful who march in the way of salvation*' (my emphasis). In reality, the church, despite keeping the teachings of Christ alive, also from time to time seems to ignore or forget certain of his teachings. The church does so because, even though all its members are saints, we, as members of such a church, are also all sinners, due to the original sin which was committed by Adam, and we are all, therefore, in need of the forgiveness of Christ. In all history, only Christ himself was without spot or blemish. The church is, therefore, in constant need of reform and the cleansing of those offences that its members commit (Nicolaidis, 2014).



## Conclusion

The Divine Liturgy is in a strong sense the meeting point of heaven and earth where we have potential to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1: 4). It is the place where people meet the self-sacrificing Jesus as God and where, through this meeting, they encounter their own human life. The Divine Liturgy connects people to the sense and purpose of life through Word and Sacrament. During the Divine Liturgy we affirm our identity as members of the Body of Christ, the *Ekklesia* and *Laos tou Theou*. Believers all gather to hear the Word of God and to confess the faith while expressing an enduring unity in love which ultimately leads to eternal life. We receive Holy Communion for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ who is the head and the body, with the church being the *Laos tou Theou*. The ‘people of God’ are the guardians of all truth, including Christian doctrine. The guardian of religion is the very body of the church, which consists of the people (*Laos*) themselves. The term ‘people of God’, in terms of the Orthodox Church, thus refers to those members of the body of Christ who believe and who will come to believe, in the *pleroma* (fullness) of the church, comprising the new Israel of God, the ‘saints’, the ‘elect’, the ‘chosen race’, and the ‘royal priesthood’. The church is ‘God’s holy people’, who consist of those baptised who participate in God’s Eucharistic communion. The *Laos tou Theou*, in either the Old Testament or the New Testament, are all those who have placed their faith in God to save them. The Old Testament ‘people of God’ trusted in the coming Messiah, whereas the New Testament ‘people of God’ put their trust in the Saviour who has come to free us from spiritual bondage. In the Orthodox *paradosi* (tradition), all of humanity is one in the sight of God. St Basil the Great stated that all humans, who are related to one another, are all *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters) who are given life by God the Creator (Vasiliades 1978).

In the Old Testament, the ‘people of God’ were the ‘sons of Abraham’, who, by their faith, trusted in God’s promise of a Messiah who would save his people from their evil ways. In the New Testament, the *Laos tou Theou* are those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as the promised Saviour (Nicolaidis, 2014). The history of Israel is the history of the *Laos tou Theou*, who are the ‘people of God’. Such a deduction is evident in God’s promise to Abraham and in the Covenant which was made with Moses on behalf of the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. The creation of the *Ekklesia* by the Incarnate Logos of God created a new and unique relationship with God’s people, which allows humanity to enter into the Covenant and to become part of the *Laos tou Theou*. The *Ekklesia* remain the *Laos tou Theou*, comprising the entire corpus of Christ and the entire communion (or fellowship [*koinonia*]) of all of the disciples of Jesus (Nicolaidis, 2014). All baptised believers are part of the chosen race and the royal priesthood, which form the holy nation of God. All of us are equally called by God to belong to his ‘people’. Jews and Gentiles, free citizens and slaves, the rich and the poor, and all genders have shared with one another in the life of the *Ekklesia* as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that the *Ekklesia* is the new *Laos tou Theou*, such a finding does not replace the initial Covenant which was bestowed on the people of Israel (Acts 3:25; Galatians 3:17). The nation of Israel still remains one, as a nation of God’s people in which, by divine grace, we are able to share in the honour and privilege of being part of the *Laos tou Theou* (Romans 9:6).

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