

Article

Liturgy and Apophaticism

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Abstract: The Orthodox liturgy is a religious phenomenon that can be analyzed phenomenologically and theologically alike, given the emphasis that both phenomenology and Orthodox theology place on experience. By proposing the Kingdom of God instead of the natural world without being able to annihilate the latter in the name of the former, the liturgy seeks divine-human communion. Through the dialogue of prayer, through symbolic and iconic openings, as well as through apophatic theology, the liturgy emphasizes the horizon of mystery as a horizon essential to the way man positions himself before God. The present text attempts to demonstrate that apophaticism, understood as an experience of the mysterious presence of God, is one of the crucial dimensions of the Orthodox liturgy; and that this apophatic presence of God reveals a way of thinking which does not become onto-theology, not even when using concepts borrowed from metaphysics. The overcoming of onto-theology is achieved here not by abandoning concepts such as “being” and “cause” but by placing the language game in the field of prayer and apophatic theology.

Keywords: liturgy; apophatic theology; Eastern Orthodox Church; onto-theology; mystery; Eucharist



Citation: Turcan, Nicolae. 2021. Liturgy and Apophaticism. *Religions* 12: 721. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090721>

Academic Editors: Christina M. Gschwandtner and Joseph Rivera

Received: 15 July 2021

Accepted: 1 September 2021

Published: 3 September 2021

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1. Introduction

We discuss the relationship between liturgy and apophaticism. Here, two observations are required: first, when using the word “liturgy”, we solely refer to the Orthodox liturgy, which is the only one we know through participation; second, we regard apophaticism as a manifestation of mystery. If the Orthodox theology teaches us that the liturgy is entirely apophatic (Stăniloae 2004, p. 118) and that all of its parts are placed under the sign and the name of mystery (Schmemmann 1998, p. 164), then we have to look at the liturgical phenomenon by starting from the significance and the meaning of this word. The main aim of our endeavor is not a new hermeneutics of liturgical texts but a theo-phenomenology of liturgical experience (for “theo-phenomenology”, see Turcan 2020, pp. 4–5).

We try to answer the following question: how can apophaticism be found in the Orthodox liturgy, and what does the transfiguration proposed by the liturgy entail? As a starting point, we question the relationships between onto-theology and the way of thinking presented in the liturgy from a phenomenological point of view. If the liturgical experience is an experience of mystery, and thus an apophatic experience, which testifies to something *beyond* this world, then its relationship with metaphysics must be investigated, starting from apophaticism. We then discuss a few liturgical phenomena: the phenomenon of the world and the transfigurations proposed by the liturgy; the phenomenon of liturgical dialogue, which has become prayer; the expression of faith in the liturgy; and the mystery of the divine-human communion that the liturgy proposes. We analyze all these phenomena from the perspective of apophaticism, understood as an experience of the incomprehensible mystery and, at the same time, as an “ecclesial experience” (Felmy 1999).

2. Onto-Theology, Liturgy, and Apophaticism

The Orthodox liturgy is a religious phenomenon par excellence. First of all, “religious” means that there are no formal a priori conditions in the subject, which may determine the occurrence of such a phenomenon and, thus, reduce it to a subjective phenomenon. If any such conditions were to exist, then God would be a creation of man, a projection

of human qualities, as in the case of Feuerbach, for whom theology was, in fact, a form of anthropology (Feuerbach 1961, p. 26). None of the participants in the liturgy would agree, however, with such an anthropological and atheistic interpretation. As a religious phenomenon, the liturgy manifests a revelation coming from elsewhere, which would be closer to a “saturated phenomenon” for which, in the relationship between intuition and concept, intuition is paradoxically offered in excess, provoking astonishment and calling to witness (Marion 2013, pp. 23–24).

Therefore, man’s liturgical work does not take place before a God of metaphysics, a conceptual god seen as a foundation for thought, as a cause of well-conducted reasoning, or as the conclusion of such reasoning, synonymous with the concept of being or *causa sui*. Heidegger accused metaphysics of having been, in fact, onto-theology (Heidegger 2002, p. 54). This concept was mentioned by Kant and refers to “transcendental theology”, which “believes that it cognizes the existence of the original being through mere concepts, without the aid of the least experience” (Kant 1996, pp. A632, B660). Called “the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics” by Heidegger, this process highlights that “metaphysics is theo-logic because it is onto-logic. It is onto-logic because it is theo-logic” (Heidegger 2002, p. 42). In Heidegger’s interpretation, however, the God of onto-theology is problematic and non-liturgical: “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god” (Heidegger 2002, p. 72). Does the liturgy reveal “the god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*”, that is, a thought closer to the “divine God” (Heidegger 2002, p. 72)?

The answer to this question, which we try to argue further, is nuanced, albeit affirmative. In the liturgy, such a way of thinking is indeed revealed as a possible overcoming of onto-theology, but not necessarily by completely abandoning the language of metaphysics, as was the case with the tradition that accepted Heidegger’s onto-theological thesis. Our thesis is that the concepts of metaphysics do not automatically transform the living God into the conceptual God, but rather the context and the “language-game” (Wittgenstein 2004, p. 7) in which these concepts are used—either that of metaphysics or that of the liturgy.

But how could the liturgy be a way of thinking when it is, first of all, a work of man, an experience, and a ritual? What does it give here phenomenologically? Space, time, phenomena, logic? The God of onto-theology is removed from the circuit, without this leading to methodological atheism, as was the case with Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological reduction (Husserl 1983, p. 58). Is the experience offered in the liturgical “theater” and “dance” sufficient to be able to speak of possible post-metaphysical thinking? Or, at the opposite pole, is the liturgy without thought? That would be an exaggeration. Jean-Yves Lacoste defined liturgy as “by convention, the particular logic that governs man’s encounter with God” (Lacoste 1994, chp. “Liminaire”). Is this logic theo-logical as well? This question is crucial because in the face of a possible negative answer, what we now call liturgical could be reduced to the sacred, as a religious *a priori* that “will simply disguise the Absolute” and “produce idolatry” (Lacoste 1994, p. 54). The sacred is faceless, obscure, impersonal; however, the work of liturgy takes place before a God of Revelation. Therefore, we must admit that liturgical logic is also a form of theo-logic and that, regardless of how it is perceived at the moment, the liturgy is structured by a way of thinking, a theological way of thinking.

Nevertheless, inasmuch as theology becomes a structure that dictates what is to happen, this step brings us to an even greater standstill. Would this not be a form of regression to onto-theology? An experience controlled entirely by thought is no longer an authentic experience because it no longer includes novelty and amazement. It is only a repetition of the identical, enfolded in its own death, a game of totality with no infinity, as Levinas presented these two concepts (Levinas 1979). The liturgy, though, is a repetition of the non-identical, an event, an experience of hospitality, and the transfiguration of one’s finitude (see Gschwandtner 2019, p. 197). Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between

rational theology and mystical or apophatic theology. The former is a figure of metaphysics that reached its peak in the great medieval systems; the latter, however, has to do with the Revelation and is, as Vladimir Lossky describes it, a form of spirituality that expresses a doctrinal attitude (Lossky 2005, chp. I). Given that it expresses life is related to life, mystical or apophatic theology is more suitable for understanding the liturgy.

Being primarily an experience, the liturgy thus has to do with this way of thinking called apophatic theology. Our understanding of apophaticism is that it is more than a negative theology, therefore, more than the rational exercise of denying theological statements in order to emphasize our own lack of knowledge of God. According to the meaning of apophaticism, expressed by St. Dionysius the Areopagite, negations go beyond affirmations without being contrary to them. Therefore, by apophaticism, we shall understand the experience of the incomprehensible mystery of God, an experience that goes beyond the language of affirmations and negations, although it is based on it. There are three moments in apophaticism: an affirmative moment, a negative moment—which means overcoming the previous one—to reach a third one, a moment of the experience of the divine mystery. For example, at first, God is understood as love, according to the name given to Him in the New Testament; in the second moment, one might say that He is not love but rather more than we understand by love, without misinterpreting such a negation of love as a claim that God might be hatred; in the third moment, God is a union of love, an infinite mystery that the mind cannot comprehend. None of God's names are exhausted in affirmation or in negation; instead, they seek the mystical encounter and experience. It is a "living apophaticism" (Stăniloae 2004, p. 431), in which the mystery is in a way the fulfillment of the words of the Revelation; it is life itself as an experience of the divine mystery, a life that does not stop at doctrine or fall into magic (Schmemmann 1998, p. 74). At first, the word "mystery" was not limited to the "seven mysteries;" it encompassed the entire content of Christian faith expressed in the belief that Christ will save mankind. The liturgy still maintains the supremacy of mystery over thought because God's liturgical experience is apophatic par excellence. An analysis of the world of liturgy, communion, prayer, and religious faith attempts to show that apophaticism, understood as an incomprehensible mystery of God, is the sine qua non-dimension of the liturgy, its authentic horizon, even though, from an experiential point of view, each participant lives it to a different degree and intensity. Starting from this, the apophatic thought involved in the liturgy might be considered a way of thinking that overcomes onto-theology.

3. A Transfigured World

Understood phenomenologically, the world encompasses both the natural and the ideal worlds, which appear as "world sense" (Husserl 1983, p. 348). As the real par excellence (Merleau-Ponty 1999, p. 466), which is constituted phenomenologically as a unit that is never given in its entirety, never as a whole, the world is enriched, according to our research, "in part intended through straightforward and categorial intuition, in part through signification" (Husserl 2001, p. 317). It is, phenomenologically speaking, a world of experience, a dwelling in which we live" (Lacoste 1990, p. 12) in relation to which the feelings of the self are indubitable, without the world itself falling into doubt. "No doubt about or rejection of data belonging to the natural world alters in any respect the *general positing which characterizes the natural attitude*. 'The' world is always there as an actuality." (Husserl 1983, p. 30).

To Heidegger, the fact-of-being-in-the-world is existential, belonging to the fundamental constitution of Dasein (Heidegger 1996, chp. 12 sqq). As a horizon of opening, the world encompasses all the relations with beings starting from a specific moment in time. The world is defining for Dasein because, inside of it, the Dasein can exercise its authenticity or abandon itself to the fall, losing itself in favor of the being it knows. Having an a priori status, the world is the horizon that cannot be surpassed and that offers conditions for the possibility of experience; it is not the totality of beings, but rather the condition under which beings are given (Lacoste 1994, chp. 3).

Last but not least, the world is “a system of meanings”, a “world of thoughts”, already acquired without a continuous synthesis. The ante-predicative world, the lived world we experience, reveals not a Kantian subject who is in the world, but someone who has a world—a world of already understood or even pre-understood meanings. It is already present in our activities, a world of thoughts on which we rely as a certainty to keep going forward (Merleau-Ponty 1999, pp. 166–67).

The liturgy is, in turn, a “world” that is constituted both phenomenologically and theologically. An atheist perspective may only notice that the world of liturgy is unnatural. To notice what the liturgy claims to be taking place as a part of it, intentionality must be doubled by hermeneutics. The relationships between the liturgy and the non-liturgical world are multiple: the liturgy can be “a ‘token’ or special part of our lives, where we practice more intensely what should shape our lives as a whole” (Gschwandtner 2019, p. 190); it can be the “true world” (Gschwandtner 2019, p. 192), “the homeland of man”, where “everything is familiar to him” and where “he speaks his mother tongue” (Gondikakis 2007, p. 69); it can be the place where the existing holiness of the world is revealed (Gschwandtner 2019, p. 193); however, to an atheist perspective, it can also be a place suspended in illusion and suppressed by the non-religious resistance of the empirical world.

The inaugural blessing of the Orthodox liturgy—“Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”—reveals to us that the world in which man is called to enter is the Kingdom of God. The “Mystery of the Kingdom”, as Alexander Schmemmann calls it, is centered around the Eucharist, in which all the believers are expected to take part (Schmemmann 1998, p. 33). This liturgical world does not abolish the mundane world of objects and people, the empirical world; through its iconic and symbolic structure, though, it calls for transfiguration. The double character of the liturgy of a present world and, at the same time, of a future Kingdom of God implies a continuous dynamic. Man’s participation in this dynamic can fluctuate between the overwhelming experience of the mysterious encounter with Christ on the one hand and, on the other hand, the poor experience of non-participation, distraction, and fatigue. Nevertheless, liturgical intentionalities invite a transfiguration of the everyday world with all of its categories, a process that unquestionably involves the mystery.

From a temporal point of view, by recalling the past and anticipating the future, the liturgy makes us contemporaries with Christ (Stăniloae 2004, p. 182). With all that He does for us, Christ appears as a mysterious present, making us contemporaries with the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and all that He will give us in the life to come. However, He “does not suppress our temporality” but “fills it and helps us to live eternity in it.” Through faith in Christ and the actualization of the liturgical present, this presence of eternity in time suspends the contradiction between time and eternity (Beauregard and Stăniloae 1995, p. 151).

From a spatial point of view, the liturgical presence of Christ fills the space and transfigures it, using church architecture and all the other symbols and icons that highlight the sacredness of the space. If one lives the experience of eternity existentially through prayer, it is no less true that feeling the presence of Christ can also mean an experience of transcending space. It is a “space of hospitality” (Gschwandtner 2019, p. 195) in which the experience of love finds its place (Beauregard and Stăniloae 1995, p. 150).

The symbols and icons bear witness to the same intention to transfigure the natural world, which is called to take part in the mystery of the future Kingdom. Apart from the fact that liturgical realism—which states that the Kingdom of God is, to some extent, already here—may be threatened by assaults of skepticism or by the inability of believers to fully participate, it may also suffer from rigid symbolic interpretations, which claim to have a definitive explanation of everything, annihilating the very mystery that constitutes the liturgical horizon. Such an interpretation, which tacitly separates symbols and icons, reaches a “symbolism of foreshadowing”, in which every object or gesture means something specific from the life of Christ or from the Kingdom of God. The accuracy of this symbolism,

which has the significant defect of suppressing mystery, is problematic (Schmemmann 1998, p. 53): the symbol represents an absence, a reminder, a fracture between what is present and seen (the symbol itself) and what is absent (the symbolized reality). Unlike symbols, icons depict a reality that is mysteriously present through them, a “visibility of the invisible” (Marion 1977, p. 25), through which the invisible offers itself as invisible (Marion 1991, p. 35). For example, the place and shape of the church, as well as the works performed in the church are more than “mere symbols”: they are sensitive means traversed by those works (Stăniloae 2004, p. 71). Therefore, a correct interpretation of the symbols would be similar to the interpretation of icons, making liturgical symbolism lead to transfiguration. Although they are “transparent only to faith” (Schmemmann 1998, p. 114), symbols create the world of the Church, flooded with the hope of the future Resurrection (Clément 1996, p. 27).

The Kingdom of God is mysteriously anticipated in the liturgy through symbols and icons, even if this is incomplete anticipation. Viewed under the sign of apophaticism, we could say that the affirmative moment is the natural world, but denied by the transfiguring intentions of the iconic openings of the liturgy to the ineffable mystery of the Kingdom of God. This is a form of apophaticism that transcends the world and expresses the mystery of the eschatological future as a liturgical experience, albeit an experience of faith.

4. Dialogue of Prayer and Overcoming Onto-Theology

The world of the liturgy is not silent: from the very beginning, it imposed a dialogue between God and the people through a third person—the priest. Dressed differently from the faithful and conducting the liturgy, the priest reveals the priesthood of Christ, bestowed from above. Christ speaks through the priest, who is a mediator, just like Christ, as true God and true man, mediates between man and God. On the other hand, the priest utters prayers using the first-person plural, thus showing that he is one of us. Liturgical dialogue is a form of prayer in which the community prays to the God indicated by the priest, taught by the Church “on the basis of the Holy Scripture and the entire tradition” (Stăniloae 2004, p. 639), and not to a faceless sacred. This affirmative moment is of crucial importance and does not nullify the mystery; instead, it opens itself towards the mystery through prayer.

The liturgy exposes a complex work of Christ, which includes multiple forms of expression: mysteries and hierurgies, the reading of the word of Scripture, the confession of the apostolic faith, interpreting the word through sermons and hymns. Thought and prayer are intertwined: the word reveals the meaning of the prayer, but the word cannot replace prayer: “hearing the word [listeners] must pray, not just think” (Stăniloae 2004, p. 142). The balance of this connection eliminates the risks of a separation that could lead either to rationalism, a way of thinking that no longer needs prayer, or to pietism, which is an excess of sentimentality that ignores thinking.

In the liturgy, there are prayers of thanksgiving, request, doxology, and confession (Nicholas Cabasilas 1997, p. 28). They reveal the union of the human world with the Kingdom of God in a communion that includes the living and the dead, the sinners and the saints, as well as the entire cosmos. The discovery of the “Church as a prayer” (Schmemmann 1998, p. 89), which takes place during the liturgy, affirms the sacrifice of the praying self and especially the personal connection that characterizes prayer: “Prayer is a state of mutual interiority between the one who prays and God” (Stăniloae 2004, p. 668), “a perichoresis”, “a back and forth between God and myself” (Stăniloae 2004, p. 154). This connection is also explained by the fact that God and man pray together. For example, the calling of the Holy Spirit is a synergetic work between man and the Spirit, although the work of the Spirit remains mysterious. The Spirit is one who bestows upon man the power to call; He offers the gift of calling, but He is also the praying in man with “with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). To recognize even in our calling the work of God’s gift is an act of supreme humility. In fact, as a virtue of recognizing God’s presence and God’s work, humility accompanies all human acts, including faith. Nothing is attainable only by man because the presence of God’s grace is already working in all His acts, which opens up human finitude to the infinity of God (Stăniloae 2004, p. 465).

What is the role of theological thought in this experience of prayer? In a phenomenological description of the prayer of the heart, Natalie Depraz eliminates any possible discussion about dogmatics, which she considers to be rational theology (Depraz 2003, p. 503). However, as we have seen earlier in the article, thought presupposes prayer and vice versa. The phenomenological description of prayer as a human experience imposes a strictly philosophical approach in Depraz's article. Hesychia, vigilance, plenitude—associated with the gift of tears—are all compared with the moments of phenomenological reduction. However, the problem occurs precisely in removing the invisible, God, and the special type of faith—in this case, an Orthodox one—which is here phenomenalized from the discussion. The phenomenological description, as a seen part, is only one side of the coin; theology offers the other side. So, how justified is an abstention (epoché) in a field in which the coordinates of faith matter so much? In prayer, in the mystical experience, the ecstasy of man understood as a faceless, non-theological experience, as a non-referential, subjective, poetic, even impersonal mysticism is not important per se; what is important is the communion with Christ, the personal God who became man, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The significance of dogmatic teachings differentiates Orthodox mysticism from other forms of mysticism. Therefore, when we tackle prayer from a phenomenological point of view, we should also consider the type of theological teachings and faith, albeit as a possibility that shows itself in that experience. Even though phenomenology does not decide on theological truths, it cannot be restricted to a noetic phenomenology, incapable of discussing the noematic dimension because this dimension shows itself only theologically, not phenomenologically.

Therefore, although liturgy is an experience to an overwhelming extent, it does not eliminate faith. As an expression of Orthodox theology, the liturgy speaks of an experience that is not a subjective one but an ecclesial one: the liturgical experience is an experience that follows the teachings of the Church. Belonging to man but received as a gift, faith is the visible part of the reality of the history of salvation and, at the same time, one of the conditions for communion with God. Orthodox spirituality engages the human being as a whole; that is why the liturgy is also life, communion, and a manifestation of the unity of faith. These three traits are all found in the Orthodox liturgy, which does not separate them but unites them. The unity of faith is, first of all, life and communion, appearing as a condition of non-transcendental possibility for the liturgy. The more prominent the apophatic dimension of the faith, the greater its importance for the liturgy. The liturgy “feeds the spiritual communion between Christians with the indescribably deep and rich content of the Christian faith” (Stăniloae 2004, p. 8), a statement that emphasizes the apophatic and always revealing dimension of faith. Far from being a set of statements that do not engage man, faith is content that proves itself to be, in the liturgical experience, boundless. “The entire liturgy is [. . .] full of the confession of the true faith” (Stăniloae 2004, p. 638). For “the right-believing faith does not result from the Eucharist, but rather the true Eucharist, or the encounter with the true Christ results from the right-believing faith” (Stăniloae 2004, p. 653). Accordingly, since the days of the early Church, the Eucharist is tied to the unity of faith of the participants (Schmemmann 1998, pp. 144–45).

This solidarity between those of the same faith can be seen in the litanies uttered in certain prayers for others. As the body of Christ, “the supra-ontological unity of the Church” (Stăniloae 1997, part. IV, I, B, 3, a) is mystical but is also visible in time and space through the unity of faith. The litany for believers and bishops is a prayer for the maintenance of the Church in this “unity everywhere and throughout the generations in the same right faith” (Stăniloae 2004, pp. 269–70). Additionally, the unity of faith is visible in the fact that the participants recite the Creed together. This connection between dogmatics and experience is based on the belief that dogmatic teachings are “expressions of the experience of Christ”, and the unwavering character of dogmas lies not in human logic but in this experience of a new way of life (Stăniloae 2004, part. IV, I, B, 3, a). Through the Holy Spirit, the Church offered the Gospels and dogmata to the world for the plenitude of new life, not as a means of philological or philosophical analysis (Gondikakis 2007, p. 22).

Dogmas are, therefore, the foundations of the Christian life, from which they arose and to which they refer. As a cause and an effect of the liturgical experience, they preserve the truth of a community that is the community of Christ and of the Holy Apostles. The faith seen in the dialogue of prayer is based on words but is constantly advancing towards the ineffable mystery. Apophaticism, as an experience of mystery, is not lacking from faith; on the contrary, it gives faith its proper dimension.

Since the theology that structures the liturgy sometimes uses words from the language of metaphysics, we should now ask ourselves to what extent the authority of these words makes it turn into onto-theology. One could interpret that the liturgy speaks of God in terms of “being”, “essence”, and “cause”: God is “existing forever, forever the same”; He “brought us out of nothing into being” (The Holy Anaphora). However, we must answer that these metaphysical echoes of liturgical prayers do not turn the doxological thinking of the liturgy into onto-theology because the “language games”, as Wittgenstein would say, and the contexts are different. The liturgical context marked by the supremacy of prayer is not a metaphysical context and does not aim to reach a theoretical conclusion, affirmed by the philosophical power of human reasoning. On the contrary, the language game of the liturgy intends to achieve a divine-human communion that goes as far as the realism of the Eucharist and which, though it may use metaphysical concepts, changes the meaning of these concepts, transforming them into vehicles of mystery. Apophaticism is the savior here. This can be observed in the collective recitation of the Creed, which speaks of the Son as being “of one *essence* with the Father”, using ontological and theological terms alike, without turning this profession into onto-theology. The liturgical context and a perpetually active apophatic intentionality, which points to the mystery of God, transfigure human concepts into iconic concepts the same way as the liturgical world transfigures its other elements. The precision of language is essential here because cataphatic theology is essential. Nevertheless, in the very exercise of negations in apophatic theology, “we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion” (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 1987, chp. I, 2, 1000B). This relationship with the divine infinity and unknowability transforms prayer into an apophatic exercise, which goes beyond knowledge in search of the One who is beyond all. This movement of spiritual progress does not nullify faith and its truths; only that it now reveals its genuine reality, which is that of an apophatic experience: faith becomes the living of God’s mystery in ecclesial communion.

5. The Mystery of Communion

The world of the liturgy is an experience of communion, a world of people who meet each other and meet God in the Church. As shown by the prayers for the entire Church, both alive and deceased, liturgical communion goes beyond the individualism of man standing alone before God. In the liturgy, everything is expressed in the plural form, by using the first-person “we” both in prayers and in chants. Communion with God goes through communion with our neighbor, and communion with our neighbor is based on the communion with God. The liturgy also expresses divine-human communion—a central theme in the theology of the Greek Fathers, from Ignatius, Irenaeus, Athanasius, and the Cappadocian Fathers, to Dionysius, Maximus, John of Damascus, and all the way to Gregory Palamas (Papanikolaou 2006, p. 155)—strengthening the general idea of understanding Christianity through the logic of a communion: “Christianity is the great mystery of personal communion [. . .], the great mystery of the growth of the person in the life of another person and ultimately in the life of the Person of Christ, full of divine infinity” (Stăniloae 1997, part. IV, II B 3). However, communion stems from self-sacrifice, from overcoming individualism, and from an understanding that becoming more open towards God and towards involves the transcendence of our own selfishness. Even though the liturgy states that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from Thee, the Father of Lights” (“The Prayer behind the Ambon”), this does not refer to a sort of

passivity on man's behalf or to an expectation of the bestowal of grace with no personal preparation. Man, through his sacrifice and work, becomes worthy of meeting God. There is no place for passivity here, though we are able to understand the infinite difference between the slight ascent of man and the abyssal descent of God, who works even during the ascent of man. Christ descends to raise us, sacrificing Himself to save us, thus offering a model of self-sacrifice.

Celebrated before the liturgy of the Faithful, the liturgy of the Catechumens prepares us through word and teaching for what is to follow. The sacrifice of Christ performed as part of the liturgy urges the participants to also overcome themselves. The gifts of the faithful, the bread and wine brought to be consecrated, are also gifts of the self with its entire life (Schmemmann 1998, p. 114), who also comes to be sanctified. The liturgy teaches us that sanctification is related to sacrifice and that sacrifice for our neighbor, even when it reaches death, is not a loss. Losing oneself in the liturgy is a form of self-recovery, not of annihilation, as through sacrifice, man "progresses in life by giving his life" (Stăniloae 1997, p. 473).

More than an individualistic adventure, the liturgical community affirms the realism of participation together with others in the mystery of God. We are far from Spinoza's *amor Dei intellectualis* insofar, as spiritual progress does not happen only through intellectual contemplation but through participation in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God and in communion with His Body and Blood. The liturgy is, as Olivier Clément calls it, the "bodily liturgy" (Clément 1996, p. 22) in which the faithful participate with body and soul in the mystery that "is celebrated in every believer and the whole liturgical community" (Gondikakis 2007, p. 85).

Liturgical realism is most visible in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, which is neither a symbol nor an icon, but the reality of the Body and Blood of Christ, a reality that only a theological gaze and the "eyes of faith" can see (Stăniloae 2004, p. 484). Nicholas Cabasilas, one of the saints who emphasized the reality of the Eucharist, brought the following arguments in favor of the reality of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist: (1) At the Last Supper, Christ said: "This is my body, this is my blood" (Mt 26: 26–28; Mk 14: 22–24; Lk 22: 17–20); (2) He commanded "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19); (3) He also gave the Apostles the power to perform this act by sending the Holy Spirit, who descends to this day to transform the gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ; "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you" (Jn 14:17); (4) Christ himself remains with us until the end of the ages, as He promised (Mt 28:20); the consecration of the Gifts in the liturgy "is carried out exactly according to the request and prayers of the priest" (Nicholas Cabasilas 1997, pp. 64–65). Through Eucharistic realism—which is impossible to see outside the faith—man's apophatic experience in the liturgy does not weaken but becomes deeper.

Liturgical communion also unveils the realism of a love that springs from God's love, who descended (kenosis) to the condition of man. Divine kenosis, as God's "self-negation" for the sake of man, all the way to crucifixion and death, reveals God's "mad love" for man. The liturgy achieves a communion of love, a unity between the participants that, based on their love of God, professes that "love is the only criterion of the Church" (Schmemmann 1998, p. 141). One can even use love as a starting point to define liturgy: "The liturgy is the environment for us to live and know the personal divine love, as the supreme meaning, or the 'true light,' plenary of existence" (Stăniloae 2004, p. 609).

In *Erotic Phenomenon*, Jean-Luc Marion spoke of the assurance against futility, which the Cartesian certainty of the ego's existence cannot give, but which love can and does give. This assurance, however, was not also an assurance against death. Instead, the fundamental question that the liturgy answers is that of death: Will I be able to overcome death (Stăniloae 2004, p. 713)? The answer given by the empirical world and by the experience of finitude is not satisfactory. Overcoming death by ignoring it, as in the case of Epicurus, only means emphasizing the division between the two ontological regimes, that of being and that of

non-being. Nevertheless, the liturgy provides this assurance against death by offering us the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity, a kingdom of love, in which we become brothers of the Son and sons of the Father through the Eucharist. We become better, in the progress of our liturgical participation, through self-sacrifice and by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit through the Eucharist. The *liturgical assurance* is an assurance through faith, through experience, and through the fact that we become members of the mystical body of Christ. Moreover, without separating faith from love, one may say that assurance through faith is a participation in the love of Christ through the Holy Spirit, a love experienced by each person during the liturgy with a different intensity.

There is no liturgical communion in the absence of apophaticism. Created in the image of God, humans are beings of mystery, just as God is mysterious; the communion between them presupposes this possibility of continuous advancement, which does not annihilate the mystery. The most authentic dimension of love manifested through this divine-human and inter-human communion is precisely the ability not to exhaust the other's mystery but to enhance it. The apophaticism of liturgical communion overcomes any secular ideological reductions to emphasize a truly fundamental dignity of man, understood as a dialogue partner of God and as "god by grace".

There is essential intentionality in liturgy, *apophatic intentionality*, directed towards God and His mysterious presence. It reveals itself through the other kinds of liturgical intentionality that point to the participants in the liturgy, to the constitutive elements of the ritual—icons, symbols, gestures, words—elements that represent cataphatic moments that help in living the mystery of God. Apophatic intentionality concerns the mysterious presence of Christ in the liturgy, which cannot be reduced to the metaphysics of presence. This apophatic presence, noticeable outside the liturgy in various circumstances of life, is lived here in dialogue with Christ and, especially, in the Eucharist. There are ways in which the mystery acts that cannot be perceived by reasoning that lacks faith (Stăniloae 2004, pp. 174–75). This is why communion is apophatic in the liturgy, whose the horizon of love is mysterious and endless. Regardless of the moments of the liturgy, man points that apophatic intentionality towards Christ, who teaches us, who sacrifices for us, and who deifies us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

6. Conclusions

The liturgy is apophatic, "... full, inseparable from the meaning of the mystery and the meaning of the Incarnation" (Clément 1996, p. 22), which means that it is an experience of the divine mystery. As it goes beyond what we understand by experience in philosophy, which presupposes first an object of experience, Lacoste has used here the term "inexperience" (Lacoste 1994, chp. 19). Even when we discuss the human experience in liturgy from a phenomenological standpoint, we accept that this is a kind of experience characterized by human intentionality, directed towards mystery. It is apophatic intentionality oriented from a noetic point of view towards the divine mystery; from a noematic point of view, apophatic intentionality passes through symbols, icons, and dogmas and perceives more of the unknowable depth of God. No knowledge presented in the liturgy offers any closed totality, any prior possession that no longer requires apophaticism. Liturgical experience, like the knowledge of God, is an experience of mystery.

The apophatic dimension of the Orthodox liturgy is multiple. There is, first of all, apophatic intentionality which points towards the unknowable God, intentionality opened by faith, understood primarily as life and experience. Knowing what one believes in does not negate the fact that God remains unknowable in His being, making Himself known in His uncreated energies, according to the understanding and the worthiness of each person. In no human form of knowledge does God lose His unknowability and mystery. The world of the liturgy is full of mystery and the apophatic presence of God. Secondly, there is intentionality directed towards communion with others; this does not replace the fundamental intentionality towards God, but it reveals it together with the truth that people are also inexhaustible mysteries created in the image of God. Communion with others

is permeated by this sense of mystery, with the love that God requires of us, by giving up our own selfishness. Thirdly, prayer expresses an important apophatic dimension. In prayer, the predicative discourse of faith is replaced by the doxological one, in a “response of praise and worship to the Love of God” (Louth 2007, p. 161). Last but not least, the Eucharist reveals itself as an apophatic phenomenon, in which communion with God is a reality of infinite depth.

As a consequence of this, liturgical apophaticism refers to the language of metaphysics that appears in the liturgy. God is called “cause” and “being”, which shows that concepts do not reduce Him to a God of metaphysics but rather the “language game” does, in which they emerge. When the liturgy uses a few metaphysical concepts in the context of prayer, they do not reduce God to an onto-theological god. Therefore, the theological thought of the liturgy could be considered a more appropriate thought to the divine God insofar as one accepts that there is a thought there. Even if there is faith/belief in the background of the apophatic intentionality, this intentionality points towards the incomprehensible mystery of God as a part of a complex experience whose purpose is the real communion of man with the living and incomprehensible God.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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