

BOOK REVIEW

The Heavenly Banquet: Understanding the Divine Liturgy. By Fr. Emmanuel Hatzidakis. pp. 420. Orthodox Witness, Maryville IL, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-9778970-1-8. Hardbound \$40.

Understanding the Liturgy - An urgent need

A common complaint among Orthodox Christians, particularly those second- and third-generation Americans who grew up in an era where the services were done mostly (or entirely) in the language of their parents and grandparents, is that they don't really understand what is going on in the Divine Liturgy. This is particularly tragic because the Liturgy is usually their main point of contact with the Church. For many, this lack of understanding is a strong contributing factor in their gradual drift away from the life of the Church. For others, secondary (though important) aspects of parish life -- connections with the Homeland, social gatherings, and loyalty to departed loved ones, among them -- assume a priority that properly belongs to the Good News of Christ Jesus that is proclaimed and lived in the Liturgy.

Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis' book, *The Heavenly Banquet: Understanding the Divine Liturgy*, is aimed squarely at correcting this problem. This clearly written and engaging text will go a long way increasing the understanding of the Liturgy both by lifelong Orthodox Christians and by inquirers and catechumens. But Hatzidakis is clear that the purpose of the book is not only intellectual understanding, but deeper participation in worship, so the Liturgy can indeed be "the work of the people."

Emphasis on Words and Actions

With this purpose in mind, it makes sense that Hatzidakis focuses on what he calls a "realistic" approach to the study of the Liturgy -- an approach that takes as its basis the liturgical text itself, illuminated by biblical connections and patristic references. He doesn't deny the value of the mystagogical and allegorical approaches to the Divine Liturgy taken by various Fathers of the Church over the centuries; rather he makes a conscious choice to focus on the words and actions of the Divine Liturgy, putting them in the context of the entire service.

Clear, Concise Explanation

Given the problem that he is addressing -- lack of understanding of the service -- and especially given our American setting in which clear, concise explanation is considered a virtue -- this approach is a good choice. As he points out, the other approaches to interpretation have actually helped shape the text of the Liturgy, in any case. More important, though, engaging on the level of "making sense" of the Liturgy is enough of a challenge. If Hatzidakis is successful, and he is, the reader will have a firm foundation for reading other approaches and holding them together.

Hatzidakis places a good deal of emphasis on the movement of the Divine Liturgy --

the way the prayers lead up to the Holy Eucharist and help the worshiper properly participate in this Mystery of Mysteries. The goal is clear: “The Divine Liturgy is the Mystery of union of human beings with God and the union of human beings among themselves.” He focuses on the way the Liturgy manifests this union by making present the Mystical (Last) Supper -- both as celebrated by Jesus Himself and then lived out in His Crucifixion and Resurrection, and as it is fulfilled in the Heavenly Banquet at His Coming at the end of all things.

Accessible to all Readers

As Hatzidakis explains in his preface, the text operates on three levels, geared toward different levels of interest. The main text explains the Liturgy prayer-by-prayer (and sometimes phrase-by-phrase and even word-by-word). Hatzidakis illuminates the way the Liturgy puts the worshiper in the context of Gospel, and he incorporates a great deal of both modern and patristic commentary to help sort out the meaning and context. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the book is the broad scope of source work that has shaped the commentary.

For those interested in a deeper explanation of the words of the service, he makes use of the graphic device known to some as “break-out boxes” with expanded commentary on aspects of the service like censuring, the presence of the Holy Angels, and the meaning of “joy and gladness” in the context of the service. Likewise, he also uses these break-out boxes to discuss doctrinal, ecclesiological and moral issues touched upon by the service.

Finally, for readers who want to go deeper, the extensive footnotes provide a wealth of information about the historical development of certain parts of the liturgy, differing views on interpretation of various points and other details.

Translations addressed

There is another three-level aspect that Hatzidakis doesn’t outline in his introduction, but which runs through the book as well. The first is the commentary on the movement of the service itself. Second, his exploration of the prayers in their context requires him at times to argue for one translation of the Greek text into English over others. He is not afraid to take on certain translations that have been widely used: for example, the explanation for his choice of, “An offering of peace, a sacrifice of praise” in the people’s exclamation before the Anaphora, which is often rendered “A mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise”: “Besides being very hard to explain; what a ‘mercy of peace’ might mean,” he says, “there is a grammatical problem with this construction.” He then offers another page of footnotes to closely examine this issue.

Current Practices Examined

The third level on which the analysis operates is that of commentary on the current practice of the Liturgy. Hatzidakis is a strong advocate, for example, of reading aloud the so-called “inaudible prayers.” Several times throughout the book, he makes the point that the reading of these prayers aloud was the earliest tradition of the Church, and that doing so enhances the participation of the people in the Liturgy. This is especially important, he says, in the case of the Anaphora prayer:

“How can the most important part of the Divine Liturgy remain secret and hidden from the faithful?” he asks. “We plead for its reading out loud, for the edification of the holy people of God. They deserve it. They are entitled to it.”

Hatzidakis is not afraid to ruffle some feathers in his critique of the present practice. In his discussion of the Cherubic Hymn, for example, he calls for the hymn to be chanted clearly and simply, so the faithful can understand the words, and he criticizes the excess of ornamentation by some chanters and choirs: He then goes on to quote several canonical, patristic and modern commentaries calling for the simple, clear chanting.

An Excellent Resource

Throughout the book, Hatzidakis offers similar thought-provoking suggestions and opinions on the current practice of the Divine Liturgy. Hatzidakis’ love for the worship of the Church and concern for the salvation of the readers is evident throughout the book. It is an impressive and inspiring work that could be put to use in both personal and group study, to help readers both understand the Divine Liturgy better and enter into it more fully.

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*The Heavenly Banquet is available from Orthodox Witness online at www.orthodoxwitness.org.
Orders may also be placed via e-mail orders@orthodoxwitness.org, and by phone 618-207-0598.*