

Foreword

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“THE HEAVENLY BANQUET” is an invitation by the author, Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis, to “make the Divine Liturgy understood by the inquiring reader” whom, we would add, once having opened its pages and tasted of the rich text of this work, will not be satisfied until the entire work has been devoured.

Motivated by a sincere and profound pastoral love for the flock of Christ, he has combined these gifts with an ardent desire to “make simple” the Great Mystery of the Divine Eucharist. This commentary, as the author describes his effort, is addressed to the laity, most of whom are ignorant of the “actual meaning of the actions and words which they see and hear during the Liturgy” (Pre-preface). If, as it has been stated, the Church laments the “unfruitfulness and meagerness in the life of her faithful,” then this commentary is a pruning knife and fertilizer to stir new life in the hearts and lives of the readers. This is a solid addition to the growing number of books authored in the English language for the faithful in the New World. No doubt, in time, it will be translated into numerous languages as well.

Although the author humbly offers us this work which is, “no more than a compilation of quotations from a number of ecclesiastical authors,” the reader will certainly recognize that it is a praise-worthy volume precisely because it presents us with these lofty quotations of others and which are, nevertheless, expertly woven by Father Emmanuel into a rich tapestry upon which *The Heavenly Banquet* is laid and which leads us to a more fruitful participation in this Great and Holy Paschal feast.

Stunned and amazed by those voices who clamor that they “get nothing out of the Liturgy,” this shepherd of souls was motivated to “provide such basic understanding for the inquisitive worshipper while keeping in mind that the Divine Eucharist is a Mystery” to “move beyond the level of ‘understanding’ to that of **experiencing** the Divine Mysteries unfolding in its course.” This is the kernel of the effort: to elevate the onlooker to become an authentic participant, to become “perfected” in the faith and in an elevated relationship with the Worshipped.

The first part of this delicious book is the Introduction, which in itself provides such tantalizing topics as: Origins, Purpose, Resurrection Character, Celebration, Centrality, and Holy Revolution of the Divine Liturgy. These brief chapters will whet one’s appetite for the main course of the banquet, which comes in the following pages.

The author has helped us tremendously by providing a text of the Divine Liturgy (“our own compilation”) to which we can return as we proceed through the explanation of the Liturgy. He even provides us with the changeable prayers from the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great († A.D. 379). Taking petition by petition and prayer by prayer, he guides us through this most awesome gift of God to man. There are some who will criticize the author for apparent liberties he has taken to make certain phrases more lucid but considering that there are numerous translations in the English and American languages, the finger points back to the hierarchy for not providing some form of agreed upon text.

There is a rich “Mini Study” prelude much of the explanation and which is presented in a manner which is neither dry nor academic but patristic in the sense of someone striving to share the depths of love and understanding of this Divine Praise with those who would partake of Wisdom and whose hunger is partially satiated and thirst partially quenched; partially because the Divine Liturgy is ever new and ever providing that “bread of life,” of which one eats but which can never totally be consumed.

A copious Bibliography of twenty pages provides the earnest reader with sources aplenty and a plethora of footnotes enrich this work for those who are intent on delving even deeper into the meaning of the Divine Liturgy.

Father Emmanuel reminds us, clergy and lay, that the “aim of our liturgical experience is much higher; it is to help us to have a **transformative experience**, to become recipients of the Holy Spirit, to ‘become one with the same body and blood with Christ’ to unite with the Theanthropos, the God-man Christ—and thus be saved.” How can anyone say that there is “nothing for me” in the Divine Liturgy!?

“The alienation of the laity from the sacramental life of the Church is a problem,” the author states in the Epilogue, “due, in part to the fact that the main service of the Church is unintelligible to the vast majority of the people. The main purpose for writing this commentary was to give to the Orthodox worshipper a tool to better comprehend the Divine Liturgy and become an active participant in it.” This is a book, which will **not** be placed on a bookshelf to collect dust; it will be an electrifying charge to those who pick it up and will be a sharp tool for extracting a bountiful harvest from its pages.

There will be those who will nit-pick and those who will not agree with the basic premise for this work but, then again, it was not written for scholars, theologians and those who have, perhaps, lost touch with the “reason-endowed” flock of Christ. The author, as was stated, is a pastor with a pastor’s heart and soul, concerned for the judgment to which he will be his own witness. This work must be understood in this sense, as a worthy contribution to Orthodox America in this 21st century, written for our time, for our needs, and for the good pasturing of the flock.

It is our sincere hope and concern that the faithful, for whom this work was accomplished and to whom it is offered (of course, the principal purpose is to glorify God in Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit), will heed the author’s fervently expressed exhortation: “They (the people) must

take charge of *their* parts, *their* replies, *their* hymns, and *their* prayers.” For those who have ears to hear, let them hear and for those who have eyes to read, let them read for “The Heavenly Banquet” will forever banish that unfortunate utterance that, “I get nothing out of the Liturgy!”

Well done, Father Emmanuel Hatzidakis. You are a worthy bearer of the holy Name, which brought you into the new life.