

## The Spiritual Meaning of the Holy Eucharist: The Real Presence of Jesus Christ

Alexandru PALCĂU\*

**ABSTRACT.** The present study highlights the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist in Orthodox theology, emphasizing its character as the Mystery of real communion between the human person and God. It analyzes the meaning of the term “spiritual” in relation to the pneumatization of humanity and of creation through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Beginning from the exegesis of chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, the study shows that the teaching of the Savior Christ concerning the Bread of Life expresses the reality of communion with His true Body and Blood, and not a merely symbolic interpretation. The Eucharist is presented in its dimensions as Mystery, Sacrifice, and communion, together with the role of the epiclesis in the transformation of the Eucharistic gifts. The study also underlines the contribution of patristic theology, especially that of Saints Dumitru Stăniloae, John of Damascus, and Nicholas Cabasilas, in explaining the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. At the same time, it examines the differences between the Orthodox understanding and Western or Protestant interpretations of Eucharistic transformation. The conclusion affirms that the Holy Eucharist represents the center of liturgical life and the full means of human deification through real participation in the Body and Blood of the Lord.

**Keywords:** Holy Eucharist, real presence, spiritual meaning, transformation of the gifts, ecclesial communion

### Summary

The study addresses the question of the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist, insisting on the fact that it represents the central Mystery of the Church’s life and the crown of all the other Sacraments. It begins from the need to clarify the term “spiritual,” showing that in Orthodox theology it does not designate

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\* Fr. PhD candidate, University of Bucharest, “Justinian Patriarch” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, “Dumitru Stăniloae” Doctoral School, Bucharest, Romania. Email: a.palcau@gmail.com

merely an interior or symbolic dimension, but the reality of pneumatization through the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the spiritual character of the Eucharist is manifested both in the sanctification of the human person and in the transfiguration of creation through the bread and wine offered for transformation.

A central point of the study is the exegetical analysis of chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, where it is shown that the Savior's statements concerning the eating of His Body and the drinking of His Blood cannot be reduced to an allegorical or symbolic interpretation, but express the reality of the ontological communion between Christ and the believer. In this context, scriptural and patristic arguments are invoked in support of the real character of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

In the final part, the study deepens the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, emphasizing the role of the epiclesis and of the work of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of the gifts. Orthodox theological positions are analyzed in relation to Catholic and Protestant interpretations, while the Eastern tradition's preference for the term "transformation" rather than the scholastic notion of "transubstantiation" is underlined. The conclusion reaffirms that the Eucharist constitutes the center of Christian existence and the means through which the human person truly participates in divine life and in his deification.

## **Introduction**

As the Mystery of the perfection of earthly life, the Holy Eucharist constitutes the crowning of all the other Sacraments and of the entire effort of the human person toward deification. In the Holy Eucharist, a mystical union is realized between the believer and the Savior Christ, a union which entails the human capacity to offer one's entire existence to God so that it may be directly spiritualized by Him.

In this sense, the Tradition of the Church has expressed from the beginning a meaning that exceeds the limits of human reason: the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist. Certainly, this idea has been constantly renewed by theologians of every age. Saint Dumitru Stăniloae the Confessor states that, within this surpassing of human reason, the Holy Eucharist impresses within us the state of resurrection necessary to overcome the death through which human beings must pass, since it

is union in the fullest degree with the One who conquered death<sup>1</sup>. Father Mihail Pomazanski shows that, in the person who communes worthily, or at least with a certain preparation, the Holy Eucharist brings forth spiritual fruits: the communicant is united with God in the most intimate manner (John 6:56)<sup>2</sup>, the soul and body are nourished, and the believer receives help for strengthening, increasing, and perfecting the spiritual life (John 6:57). It becomes a pledge of the future resurrection and of blessed eternal life (John 6:58), while he also draws attention to the condemnation incurred by the one who communes without preparation (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:29)<sup>3</sup>.

### 1. Clarifying the Meaning of the Term “Spiritual”

Although it may seem surprising, there are many persons who either accept the idea of a spiritual meaning without having a clear vision of the implications of the term “spiritual”, or consider that the expression has no proper place within Eucharistic teaching, being used without a clear direction. In this regard, terminological clarification and hermeneutics are necessary in order to preserve the primordial meaning of the word “spiritual” when it is used in all theological subjects, including the teaching on the Holy Eucharist.

According to an academic dictionary<sup>4</sup>, the Romanian term “duhovnicesc” is an adjective formed from the noun “duhovnic” and the suffix “-esc”, and its primary meaning, according to the cited source, refers to an action or deed belonging to the spiritual father, while its secondary meaning concerns a teaching of the soul or a spiritual teaching. Another source<sup>5</sup> retains as a secondary meaning of the word duhovnicesc the sense of an action “which refers to the inner life of the human person; psychic; spiritual”. If secular sources consider the primary meaning of this term to refer to the action of the spiritual father, Orthodox theology is responsible for emphasizing the depth of the word’s inner rationale and for bringing to the forefront the fact that nothing can become spiritual unless it is

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<sup>1</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 3, 2nd ed., Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Bucharest, 1997, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in English are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, accessed through BibleGateway.com portal:

<sup>3</sup> Mihail Pomazanski, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, trans. Florin Caragiu, Sophia, Bucharest, 2009, 229.

<sup>4</sup> Academia Română, Institutul de Lingvistică, *Micul Dicționar Academic*, Univers Enciclopedic, Bucharest, 2010, 236.

<sup>5</sup> *Noul Dicționar Explicativ al Limbii Române*, Litera International, Bucharest, 2002, 138.

pneumatized, unless it receives the grace of the Holy Spirit, unless it is touched by the uncreated divine energies. Thus, it may be stated that “any gesture, experience, or thing that concerns Christian life in the Holy Spirit, and anything that reveals the spiritual foundation of phenomena and their structural anchoring in God, belongs to spirituality. Spirituality means being able to see God through all things that belong to the world and that thus become transparent to Him”<sup>6</sup>.

In the West, the term “spirituality”, derived from “spiritus, spiritualis”, is used predominantly and may serve as a synonym for “spiritual”, although it does not succeed in encompassing the full meaning of the term consecrated in the Eastern Christian space. In its general sense, spirituality includes everything related to the spirit, namely thought, knowledge, expression, and so forth; thus, one may speak in a general way of the spirituality of a period, a people, a group, or a person. In its religious sense, spirituality refers to the living bond between the human person and God, to the relationship between the human spirit and the divine spiritual reality.

According to the new Dictionary of Orthodox Theology, the term spirituality is defined as the “conscious and free living of the grace of God by the human person and the Holy Trinity is the basis of Orthodox spirituality”<sup>7</sup>. With regard to the human person, his spiritualization is synonymous with the spiritualization or pneumatization of his whole being, beginning with Baptism and continuing during life through the other Holy Sacraments; with regard to created nature, however, its spiritualization is manifested through the real and personal presence of the Holy Trinity within it.

In theological writings, one encounters various forms of expression of Christian spirituality which, in general, convey the same central idea: life lived in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and thus also the spiritual life. Therefore, the Eucharist, as the mystery of communion with the deified humanity of Christ and the fullest communion with Him in the unity of the Church, reveals its meaning only in and through the Holy Spirit, who works spiritual adoption in believers<sup>8</sup>.

Consequently, it becomes clear that everything we consider “spiritual” stands in close relation to the Holy Spirit. Saint Dumitru Stăniloae states that the Holy Spirit radiates into the world through the incarnate Son, as the love of God for human beings and of human beings for God. The Holy Spirit raises

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<sup>6</sup> “Duhovnicie,” *Știință și Religie*, accessed October 17, 2019, <http://www.science-et-religion.fr/ro/dictio/48-duhovnicie>.

<sup>7</sup> Ștefan Buchiu and Ioan Tulcan, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, Basilica, Bucharest, 2019, 885.

<sup>8</sup> †Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, *Teologie și spiritualitate*, Basilica, Bucharest, 2009, 66.

creation into the plane of inter-Trinitarian love and deification, so that the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Eucharist does not have only the purpose of externally changing the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, but of introducing divine life into creation<sup>9</sup>.

To understand the spiritual meaning not only of the Holy Eucharist, but also of created realities more generally, means to enter, through them and through the matter offered by created things, into relation with the living meanings and the uncreated energies of God. If the human person is spiritualized through the Holy Sacraments, it is readily understood that the Eucharist is the full means of his pneumatization; for this reason, the other Sacraments stand in relation to the Holy Eucharist and lead the human person toward it. The spiritual character of the Holy Eucharist unfolds in two directions: first, the human person is sanctified through the real presence of the Savior Christ within him; second, nature, through its representative elements in the Eucharistic Mystery, bread and wine, is spiritualized through the mediation of the grace of the Holy Spirit, invoked by the ministers of the Church in the name of the Holy Trinity not only during the Eucharistic epiclesis, but throughout the entire Divine Liturgy.

### ***1.1. Chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John: The First Exposition of the Spiritual Meaning of the Eucharist***

The text of chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John is an essential exegetical point for the teaching on the Holy Eucharist, both for the Orthodox Church and for the other confessions, which throughout time have sought to relate themselves as much as possible to this passage, often diverting its spiritual meaning in order to ground their own teachings. In this regard, an Orthodox presentation of this passage is necessary.

After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand men, the people again ask for bodily bread, but Jesus directs their attention toward a higher food: whoever eats it will no longer hunger, but will have eternal life (v. 28). When He says that “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (v. 33), hermeneutical investigation draws attention to the fact that in Greek the noun “artos”, “bread”, is masculine, while the pronoun rendered in Romanian by “that” is in fact masculine and should be translated as “He”, thus creating an ambiguity which Christ clarifies by saying: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will

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<sup>9</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica și mistică Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2002, 49.

never be thirsty” (v. 35). Even more clearly, He says: “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life [...]. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (vv. 47-51).

The final words cannot be understood allegorically, because in Holy Scripture the expression “to eat someone’s flesh”, when interpreted allegorically, means to cause harm to someone (Job 19:22; Ezekiel 39:17; James 5:3), and in the present case the passages cannot be understood in this way. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the Jews asked one another, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (v. 52), which proves that the proper understanding of Christ’s words is literal.

The Savior did not tell the Jews that they had misunderstood Him, but very clearly and with great force affirmed the same meaning: “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. (vv. 53-56).

Moreover, even the disciples considered that “this is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” Yet Christ assures them that they have understood precisely what He is referring to, saying: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (v. 63), while also knowing that some of the disciples did not believe because of the difficulty of receiving this teaching (cf. v. 64).

Christ’s words concerning His Body and Blood confirm that whoever communes of them will have eternal life, will be raised for the Kingdom of Glory on the Day of Judgment, and will enter into the most intimate communion with Christ. Therefore, from a careful examination of the biblical accounts concerning the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist, it is clear that at the Mystical Supper the Eucharistic bread and wine were changed into the Body and Blood of Christ; consequently, in the Eucharist there can be no question of a merely symbolic or spiritual communion. Saint John of Damascus states: „The bread and wine are by no means an image of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, God forbid, but the very Body and Blood of Christ united with the divinity ... not as though the body received by the Christian descended from heaven: the bread and wine are

changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord”<sup>10</sup>. In chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, the Savior Christ offers the spiritual interpretation of the Mystery that He will institute at the Mystical Supper, emphasizing the reality of the transformation of the Eucharistic elements into His own Body and His own Blood.

### ***1.2. The Spiritual Meaning Given by the Eucharist as Mystery, Sacrifice, and Recapitulation***

The Eucharist is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Before the sanctification of the gifts, the celebrating priest commemorates in the prayer said silently the great works of God, glorifies Him, and thanks Him for calling the human person from non-being, for His great and manifold providence after the fall, and for the economy of His salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, all the faithful present in the church during these holy moments, glorifying God, pray to Him: “We praise You, we bless You, we give thanks to You, O Lord...”<sup>11</sup>.

This pure thanksgiving within the Eucharist arises from true knowledge, from the fullness of the soul that has come to know God, through which the integral knowledge of the world is also restored, a knowledge fragmented by the fall of the human person from God and reduced to mere knowledge about the world<sup>12</sup>. Through thanksgiving and blessing, Christ placed the bread in close relation with God the Father; therefore, it was filled with the divine Spirit, who is also the Spirit radiating from Christ. Sanctification carries this process further, because sanctification is one with sacrifice, and through it transformation is accomplished<sup>13</sup>.

In the Eucharist, Christ offers Himself to the Father as man, not in a juridical sense, but by thereby opening for us the way to the Father. He places Himself at our disposal in the Eucharist so that, together with Himself, He may offer us also to the Father, because we can enter before the Father only in a state of pure sacrifice, a state acquired only from the pure sacrificial state of Christ,

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<sup>10</sup> Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, trans. Dumitru FECIORU, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, Bucharest, 2005, 197.

<sup>11</sup> Pomazanski, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 233.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandre Schmemmann, *Euharistia, Taina Împărăției*, trans. Boris RĂDULEANU, Anastasia, Bucharest, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în liturghia ortodoxă*, 2nd ed., Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2004, 446.

who continuously offers Himself to the Father in order to give us the power to offer ourselves together with Him<sup>14</sup>.

The Holy Mystery of the Eucharist is also a mystery that unifies Christians in the Body of Christ: it incorporates into Christ those who have been baptized and anointed with Holy Chrism, and it enables those already incorporated into Christ to grow in Him, with the help of the Holy Spirit. It unifies in the Church of Christ all those who gather to celebrate it with their priest, ordained by their bishop. The Eucharist unifies the faithful because Christ gathers them in order to offer them, together with Himself, to the Father as a sacrifice, and because all commune of Christ.

In this sense, the liturgical anaphora is praise and a manifestation of the community's will to serve God, together with all rational creation and the angelic hosts, for all that God has done, and above all for what He has done through His Son for human beings, for the Eucharist which He instituted as a means of His union with them. The Lamb, which is the community's incomplete sacrifice until the transformation, becomes not only Christ's sacrifice for the community, but also the community's full sacrifice, Christ's sacrifice being impressed upon the sacrifice of the community. Within the anaphora, we offer to Christ the bread and wine, just as they were offered to Him by the disciples at the Mystical Supper, so that He may transform them into His Body and Blood. In this way, we offer material bread so that heavenly Bread may be given to us<sup>15</sup>.

Holy Scripture offers clear indications of the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist, beginning with the writings of the Old Testament, in Malachi 1:10-11, where it is said that God will no longer receive sacrifices from the Jews, but that from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice will be offered. The words of institution of the Eucharist state that the Body is broken for many and that the Blood is of the New Law or New Covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. The verbs in the present tense show that this is a present sacrifice through which the Lord anticipated, in an unbloody manner, the Sacrifice of the Cross. Likewise, Saint Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:16-21, opposing the Eucharistic Sacrifice to pagan sacrifices, shows that the former brings real communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord, while the latter brings communion with demons.

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<sup>14</sup> Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 3:73.

<sup>15</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, „Teologia Euharistiei” *Ortodoxia* no.3 (1969), Editura Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, Bucharest, 206.

If true worship of God means submission, obedience, and the fulfillment of all things, when could we submit ourselves to God more concretely than when we become His members? To whom could the head command more properly than to its own members? This is precisely what the Eucharist accomplishes, more fully than any other Sacrament: it makes us members of Christ<sup>16</sup>.

In this sense, the Eucharistic Sacrifice is not a new sacrifice distinct from that of the Cross, but the same sacrifice, continually present, yet unbloody, under the form of bread and wine. It is offered for all who participate in it directly or indirectly, through commemorations and particles, so that they may partake of its fruits.

Saint Dumitru Stăniloae distinguishes between the moment of transformation, in which the sacrificial aspect is emphasized, and the moment of communion, in which the sacramental aspect is distinguished in relation to the community. The moment of transformation actualizes Christ's sacrifice for the community, corresponding to the fact that He sacrificed Himself on Golgotha for all humanity, whereas the moment of Communion corresponds to the necessity that the human person decide personally to appropriate Christ's sacrifice. The Lamb that is transformed represents the spirit of the community as a whole, and each member of the Church benefits from this new ascent of the community in Christ; yet the human person must decide, through a distinct act of his own will, to make full use of Christ's sacrifice through personal union with Him<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, it may be said that the bread and wine are also considered an unbloody and rational sacrifice because, invisibly, they contain within themselves our rational body, organically united with our blood in a whole into which they will naturally be changed; on the other hand, they are considered the Body and Blood of Christ, into which they will be changed mystically, without His repeating the shedding of His blood<sup>18</sup>.

From what has been presented above, and from the moments preceding the transformation of the Eucharistic elements into the Body and Blood of the Lord, it may be maintained that, from the very beginning of the Proskomedia, everything that gravitates around the Holy Eucharist acquires a spiritual meaning, an understanding that surpasses a purely rational reception and has at its epicenter the grace of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>16</sup> Nicolae Cabasila, *Despre viața în Hristos*, trans. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, Bucharest, 2014, 129.

<sup>17</sup> Stăniloae, "Teologia Euharistiei", 356.

<sup>18</sup> Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*, 364.

Christ became the Head of the Church through His sufferings and was sanctified and glorified through them (John, 17), by laying aside the consequences of sin present in the human nature He assumed representatively. Christ saves human beings because He incorporates them into Himself and gradually assimilates them to His risen humanity. The Christ-Church communion is founded upon the Church's participation in the suffering and resurrection of Christ and exists within it; this means that the Church is the sacramental Body of the Lord and recapitulates all the states through which Christ passed in order to deify the nature of those contained within it.

Christ chose to give Himself to us under the sign of the supper in order to nourish us, not in the sense of sustaining bodily life, but by giving Himself, the incarnate Word, to our "religious personality" in order to communicate His eternal life to us and to introduce us into communion with the Father: "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me" (John 6:57)<sup>19</sup>.

Christ's remembrance of us is realized within us through our remembrance of Christ, and it constitutes the essence of our faith, through which the new Life is given to us. To believe in Christ also means to keep Him in mind and to remember Him. From the beginning, the faith of Christians was memory and remembrance; yet remembrance has been restored in its life-giving fullness, because, unlike the memory of fallen nature, which "illusorily revives the past", the new remembrance is the joyful recognition of the Risen One as present and at hand; not only does it recognize Him, but it also meets Him and lives communion with Him in a real and living way<sup>20</sup>.

Communion with Christ is received by the Christian who discovers himself in and through the Eucharist, by which a dynamic communion with Christ is obtained and lived. Through this communion, the believer is transfigured and becomes a true Christ-bearer, because the one who is in communion does not take part in a simple commemorative banquet, but reaches union with Christ and with the other Christian brethren. Therefore, the full communion with Christ realized in the Eucharist is also the full communion of the faithful with one another, who together form the extension of the Body of Christ; in this way the Eucharist becomes the Mystery of unity<sup>21</sup>.

Father Alexandre Schmemmann considers the understanding of the Eucharist as the Mystery of remembrance to be a reduction or limitation when it is

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<sup>19</sup> Valer Bel, "Biserică și Euharistie," *Studii Teologice*, no. 3-4 (1982): 237.

<sup>20</sup> Schmemmann, *Euharistia*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Bel, "Biserică și Euharistie," 239.

understood merely as a reference to what Christ instituted at the Mystical Supper, namely the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. In such an approach, remembrance is attributed the power of transformation, the active power of the Mystery, so that the Mystery of remembrance becomes the cause of this work, while the cause of remembrance is the institution of the Eucharist at the Mystical Supper. This limitation is clearly seen in Catholic theology, which considers that the transformation takes place at the moment when the words of institution are pronounced, the epiclesis being abandoned<sup>22</sup>.

The bond with Christ is our true life, because we come to be His members and His sons, partaking of His Blood and of His Spirit, binding our life to God more closely than we could by our own efforts alone, indeed more closely than what we possess ontologically within ourselves, since Christ is more intimately related to us than even our bodily parents are<sup>23</sup>.

The remembrance in the Eucharist is the gathering into a single whole of the entire experience of salvation, of the full reality given to us in the Church and constituting our life. Every celebration of the Eucharist is a gathering, a restoration of the fullness of our remembrance, and a “re-cognition” of the world. In the Liturgy entrusted to us to celebrate until His coming, we do not repeat or merely prefigure; rather, we ascend into the mystery of salvation and of the new life accomplished once for all, yet given to us for eternity. In this heavenly, eternal Eucharist, above the world, Christ does not descend to us; rather, we ascend to Him<sup>24</sup>.

The Eucharist unifies in the same Christ those who celebrate it and commune of it everywhere through priests ordained by bishops who are in communion; therefore, through it the unity of the Church is perfected and preserved.

## **2. The Real Presence of Christ as a Necessity of the Spiritual Dimension**

Christ is really present in the Eucharist in order to make us partakers of all that has been accomplished in His Body, of their continuation in Him until today and unto the ages of ages, communicating them to us now in actuality according to the measure in which we can receive them in this age, while this

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<sup>22</sup> Schmemmann, *Eucharistia*, 199.

<sup>23</sup> Cabasila, *Despre viața în Hristos*, 145.

<sup>24</sup> Schmemmann, *Eucharistia*, 225.

present communication invisibly contains all that we will be able to receive in the age to come. In the Eucharist, all our salvation is concentrated so that we may appropriate it personally. The Eucharist, by uniting us with Christ, makes us like Him, impressing upon us also the state capable of sacrifice, the power of the resurrection, and eternal glory<sup>25</sup>.

The Eucharist is, par excellence, the Mystery of Christians' communion with Christ, because in it Christians no longer commune only of the grace of Christ, but of His very Body, which becomes within them the source of all divine energies as a risen Body. Through this, communion between human beings and God is realized, a communion that may weaken over time; for this reason, we must commune frequently of Christ. Communion with Christ means communion in His mode of existence. We cannot become partakers of eternal life until we are ontologically united with its source, the Savior Christ<sup>26</sup>.

For the purpose of determining its spiritual meaning, we may affirm that the transfigured Body of Christ is present in the Eucharist not only as power, but substantially, in a way not perceived by our senses. This occurs because the bread and wine are changed according to substance, even though not according to their appearances, in a manner not perceived by our senses<sup>27</sup>.

Saint Dumitru Stăniloae stated:

“Even before His death, Christ bears within Himself the intense feeling of sacrifice for us. Through this intense feeling of sacrifice and through the Spirit within Him, He transfigures in depth His Body and, through it, the ontological foundation of the bread, leaving it bread only on the surface, because of the organic connection it has with the entire cosmos before the end. Yet this deep transfiguration of the bread anticipates the age to come, when bodies spiritualized by the Body of Christ will place their seal upon all spiritualized things, and through all things they will be seen as bodies united with Christ as the source of the power of resurrection and transfiguration of all. The Eucharist contains within itself an eschatological and universal openness, and the transfiguring power of Christ comes from His sacrifice. Whoever sacrifices himself out of love overwhelms all things through love”<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Stăniloae, “Teologia Euharistiei”, 344.

<sup>26</sup> Gheorghe Sava, “Sfânta Euharistie ca Jertfă și Taină în fața obiecțiilor sectare”, *Ortodoxia* 38, no. 2 (1986): 85.

<sup>27</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, “Dumnezeiasca Euharistie în cele trei confesiuni,” *Ortodoxia* 5 (1953): 68.

<sup>28</sup> Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*, 442.

According to Orthodox teaching, the transformation of the elements takes place only after the invocation of the Holy Spirit, who also accomplishes it. This does not mean that Christ is reinserted into matter; rather, matter is changed into the heavenly reality of the Body and Blood of Christ. In this regard, Saint John of Damascus clarifies the matter, saying:

“The bread itself and the wine itself are changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord. And if you ask how this happens, it is enough for you to hear that it is through the Holy Spirit, just as the Lord took for Himself and in Himself a body from the Holy Theotokos; for the word of God is true, active, and almighty, but the manner cannot be investigated. It is not without interest to say this also: just as, in a natural way, bread through eating, and wine and water through drinking, are changed into the body and blood of the one who eats and drinks, so also the bread of offering, the wine, and the water, through the invocation and coming of the Holy Spirit, are changed in a manner above nature into the Body and Blood of Christ, and they are no longer two, but one and the same. The bread and wine are not an icon of the Body and Blood of Christ—may it not be so—but the very deified Body of the Lord”.<sup>29</sup>

The sanctified Gifts are not merely signs that remind the faithful of redemption, as Zwingli teaches; nor is Christ present in them only through His work and power, according to Calvin; nor, finally, is He present only in the sense of “penetration,” as the Lutherans confess. Rather, the Gifts sanctified in the Mystery are changed or “transubstantiated” into the true Body and true Blood of Christ, as the Savior said: “My Flesh is true food, and My Blood is true drink” (John 6:55). Orthodox theology does not deny the term “transubstantiation,” but prefers the term “transformation,” thereby avoiding dependence on philosophical categories<sup>30</sup>.

The human inability to see Christ physically in the Eucharist is due to the solidarity of our body with the present non-transparency of matter, with its current state of incomplete illumination by the Spirit of Christ, which is propagated from His transfigured Body. Although the forms of bread and wine secretly belong to the Body and Blood, they remain untransfigured and prevent us from seeing His Body and Blood; they will remain so until the transfiguration of the cosmos, when we will have direct communion with Christ. Moreover, if the transformation were to take place in a perceptible way, Christianity would be merely a magical cult and not a religion of faith, hope, and love<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, 232.

<sup>30</sup> Pomazanski, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 230.

<sup>31</sup> Stăniloae, “Teologia Euharistiei,” 346.

The Lord is present in the Eucharist from the moment of transformation onward, under the forms of bread and wine, substantially united with them. The words of institution show that He was present in them before the words were pronounced, and this fact is also confirmed by the practice of the ancient Church, which carefully preserved the transformed Gifts in the church and sent them to the sick and to those in prison for Communion. The same permanence of the Body and Blood of the Lord under the forms of the sanctified bread and wine is also shown by the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. All these confirm that, from the beginning of the Christian era, the conviction existed that Christ is permanently present in the Eucharistic elements after their transformation.

Therefore, the Holy Eucharist is the perfection of the other Sacraments and helps to fulfill what is not possible in the other Sacraments, causing the grace received through them to shine more powerfully, even though it is darkened by the shadow of the earth. Only Communion can bring back to life those who have died because of sins, since the fallen human person cannot rise from that state by human powers alone, just as human wickedness cannot be expiated through human worthiness<sup>32</sup>.

Father Stăniloae testified that Christ's presence with His Body and Blood under the forms of bread and wine is a presence in which Christ exists in the most intensified manner as Person, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, because He gives us not only a work through His Body, but His very Body, sacrificed and risen, since this is what is now required. In this way, through the radiation of His Holy Spirit, He intensifies to the utmost His efficacy upon the matter of bread and wine, in order to offer Himself through their forms, in an act of supreme love and overwhelming transformation, with His own Body and Blood as sacrifice to the Father and, at the same time, to the faithful, so that they too may offer themselves, together with Him and through His power, to the Father and to one another<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, the dogma of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist helps us understand several important aspects for receiving its spiritual meaning. First, by communing of the Body and Blood of the Lord, we also commune of His divinity, because the Savior's divinity remains inseparable from His humanity in His Person. Second, however many places the Eucharist may be celebrated in at the same time, in all these places there is one and the same Body and Blood of the Lord, and therefore the same whole Christ. Moreover, the bread and wine changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord remain Body and Blood as long as

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<sup>32</sup> Cabasila, *Despre viața în Hristos*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune*, 175.

these elements are preserved, and not only at the moment when Christians commune of them. For this reason, the reverence due to them must be very great. The conscience of every believer must impress upon him the proper reverence when entering the church, with the constant awareness that on the Holy Table there always rests the Body and Blood of the Savior; in other words, Christ is always present in the church<sup>34</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist cannot be reduced to an interior, metaphorical, or merely symbolic understanding of Christian worship. In the Orthodox theological perspective, the term “spiritual” does not indicate a departure from the material or visible dimension of the sacrament, but rather its transfiguration through the grace and work of the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is spiritual precisely because it is pneumatological: through the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of bread and wine are not merely blessed as signs of a past event, but are truly transformed into the Body and Blood of the crucified, risen, and glorified Christ. Thus, the spiritual character of the Eucharist does not weaken the reality of Christ’s presence, but confirms and deepens it. The Eucharist is not less real because it is spiritual; on the contrary, it is spiritual because it communicates the most profound reality of divine life to humanity.

This understanding is especially important in relation to the discourse of the Bread of Life in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. Christ’s words concerning the eating of His Body and the drinking of His Blood cannot be adequately interpreted as a simple allegory or as a purely moral exhortation. The insistence with which the Lord speaks of His Body as true food and His Blood as true drink reveals the concrete and salvific realism of Eucharistic communion. The Eucharist is therefore the sacramental fulfillment of Christ’s promise that those who partake of Him will have life in themselves and will be raised up on the last day. Its spiritual meaning lies precisely in this union between the believer and Christ, a union that is not psychological, imaginative, or symbolic, but real, personal, ecclesial, and ontological.

At the same time, the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist is inseparable from its sacrificial dimension. The Eucharist is the unbloody actualization of the one sacrifice of Christ, not as a repetition of Golgotha, but as the sacramental

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<sup>34</sup> Isidor Todoran and Ioan Zăgrean, *Teologia Dogmatică*, 3rd ed. (Bucharest: Renașterea, 2000), 314.

participation of the Church in the same saving offering. In the Eucharist, Christ offers Himself to the Father and, at the same time, gathers the faithful into His own state of self-giving love. The believer does not remain a passive recipient of a sacred object, but is called to enter into the sacrificial movement of Christ Himself. By receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, the Christian is formed according to the pattern of Christ's own obedience, humility, love, and offering. Therefore, Eucharistic communion has a deeply ascetical and transformative meaning: it calls the communicant to become what he receives, namely a living member of the Body of Christ.

The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the indispensable foundation of this spiritual meaning. If the Eucharistic gifts were only symbolic reminders of Christ, they could inspire memory, devotion, or moral imitation, but they could not communicate the divine life itself. Orthodox theology insists that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become the true Body and Blood of Christ, while the manner of this transformation remains a mystery that transcends rational explanation. This mystery must not be approached through a merely philosophical curiosity, but through faith, reverence, and liturgical participation. The Eucharistic presence of Christ is not accessible as an object of empirical observation, because it belongs to the order of sacramental reality, in which visible matter becomes transparent to divine grace.

Moreover, the spiritual meaning of the Eucharist extends beyond the individual communicant and reveals the mystery of the Church herself. Those who partake of the one Bread and the one Cup are united not only with Christ, but also with one another in Him. The Eucharist is therefore the sacrament of ecclesial communion, the place where the Church manifests herself most fully as the Body of Christ. The faithful do not gather merely around a shared religious memory or around a common moral ideal, but around the living Christ, who gives Himself as food and drink for the life of the world. In this sense, the Eucharist creates, sustains, and renews the unity of the Church. It is both the source and the summit of ecclesial life, because in it the Church receives the very life of her Head.

In conclusion, the spiritual meaning of the Holy Eucharist is the mystery of real communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit, within the life of the Church, for the deification of the human person and the transfiguration of creation. The Eucharist is spiritual not because it is less bodily, less material, or less concrete, but because it is the place where the material is filled with the divine, where the faithful are united with the glorified humanity of Christ, and where the Church becomes ever more deeply what she is: the Body of Christ. To

partake of the Eucharist is to enter into the mystery of Christ's life, sacrifice, resurrection, and eternal communion with the Father. Therefore, any reduction of the Eucharist to symbol, memorial, religious meal, or moral inspiration diminishes its true spiritual meaning. In the Orthodox understanding, the Holy Eucharist remains the supreme sacrament of divine-human communion, the living center of the Church, and the fullest means by which the human person is sanctified, renewed, and led toward theosis.

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