

10/9/2011

Fr John Wehling

Q&A

“Why does the Divine Liturgy contain so many litanies? Why, for example, do we say, ‘Again and again in peace let us pray to the Lord’ if we’ve just done it.”

In the fourth and fifth centuries the Church experienced remarkable growth. This was due, in no small part, to the fact that the persecution of Christians came to an end in the Roman Empire. The growth resulting from this time was witnessed not only by an influx of people into the Church but also by the number of churches/temples being built throughout the empire. Major cities like Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria, along with Jerusalem, became filled with churches and chapels of prayer.

In this environment a practice (re-)emerged that would have been mostly impossible in times of persecution, but which had its roots in the Old Testament: the procession of the people of God to the Temple. In the Old Testament and among the Jews there was a tradition of going in procession on feast days to the Temple, of “going up” to the House of the Lord. This act involved more than simply “going to the temple”: it was a spiritual act, a commemoration of the Exodus, a pilgrimage moving from bondage to the liberty identified most fully with the House of God where His presence dwelt.

This practice of processing to the temple was picked up by the Church in the period following the conversion of St Constantine. Christians, led by the bishop and the clergy, would process throughout the city to the cathedral. As they went through the city, from church to church and chapel to chapel, more “pilgrims” would join the festal procession and everyone would sing psalms and hymns, stopping along the way to intersperse prayers and litanies with the songs. Finally, upon arriving at the cathedral, the great doors of the church would be opened and the bishop and clergy, followed by the people, would enter singing and the Liturgy “proper” would begin.

Today, what used to be the actual entrance into the cathedral is called the “Little Entrance” with the Gospel which the clergy and altar servers make during the third antiphon. The connection with the older processional/stational liturgy is lost, to some degree, because we stand in church, in the same spot, from the time we arrive there and the clergy make the “entrance” by leaving the altar and returning to the altar. (The connection with the old processional/stational liturgy is most fully witnessed these days when a bishop serves, because he has been standing in the middle of the church from before the beginning of the Liturgy and it is at this point, after the third antiphon, when we sing “Come, let us worship...”, that he enters the Holy Altar with the clergy and the altar servers.) Nowadays, the beginning of the Divine Liturgy -- the Great Litany and Little Litanies (“Again and again in peace...”) interspersed between the antiphons -- all happens as we stand still in church in the same spot. And as there is no physical procession to the church we are in danger of forgetting the processional nature of this part of the service to the Lord: that is, that we are moving toward the Kingdom; drawing near to the throne of grace.

So when we offer litanies between our psalms/antiphons -- “Again and again....” -- it can serve as a reminder to us that we are a pilgrim people who are moving toward the Kingdom of God which we hear proclaimed in the scriptures and the homily, and which we receive in Holy Communion. In truth, we would do well to see our whole life, every moment of every day, as a pilgrimage toward the experience of the Kingdom of God in the Divine Liturgy. It might illumine and give new vigor to our fasting and prayer, our love of our neighbor, our reading of the scriptures, and our work, if we saw it for what it, in fact, is: a step in our great procession and pilgrimage toward the Kingdom of God present and real in the Holy Chalice.

Of course, the great exodus/pilgrimage/procession that is our whole life in this world will reach its entrance at our death. Then it will be, if we enter through the narrow gate of the Kingdom of God, that the prayer offered at the Liturgy will be fulfilled: “O Christ, great and most holy Pascha, O Wisdom, Word, and Power of God: grant that we may more perfectly partake of Thee in the never-ending day of Thy Kingdom.”