

***Deification through the Cross:* Reflections from an Implied Ideal Worshiper**

ANDREW J. SUMMERSON

*Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies
Toronto, Ontario*

Khaled Anatolios's most recent book, *Deification through the Cross*,¹ develops a definition of salvation out of his experience of the Byzantine liturgy. This experience of worship offers an immersion in what he calls "doxological contrition." By this, Anatolios means that Christ saves us by offering us the ability to participate in the mutual glorification of the persons of the Holy Trinity by vicariously repenting for our sins. For Anatolios, this objective content is subjectively appropriated in Byzantine Christian worship. To explore this theme, Anatolios develops a working account of "doxological contrition" through a synthetic discussion of the *Lenten Triodion* and *Pentecostarion*, books of liturgical hymnography that govern the Byzantine worship from Lent to Pentecost. Anatolios derives his approach from the adaption of reader response theory, which aims to expose the effect a text should have on the "implied ideal reader." As such, his account speaks from the perspective of the "implied ideal worshiper"—presumably a theologically educated congregant who can seize these themes that evaporate into the ether as quickly as incense swung throughout the church during the services.

Let me say from the outset, I heartily recommend Anatolios's book. It is both an ambitious work and a rewarding read. Ambitious because Anatolios's approach makes otherwise fragmented theological disciplines—liturgical

¹ Khaled Anatolios, *Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

studies, Scripture, historical theology, and systematics—fruitful dialogue partners in his exposition of a working account of the Christian experience of salvation. Rewarding because the reader can explore in depth the touchstones of the Christian tradition through Anatolios’s deep retrieval of a more coherent soteriology. *Deification of the Cross* demonstrates the perennial value of historical theology to correctly account for the “half-forgotten, half misunderstood” details of the Christian tradition in the face of caricatures that at best misrepresent and at worst present an idolatrous, counterfeit Christianity.

Eastern Christian Liturgy and Revelation

Perhaps I am not Anatolios’s ideal audience; I may be too close to the source material and lack objectivity. That aside, the bulk of my reflections on this book comes from the perspective of an “implied ideal worshiper.” I do share some of Anatolios starting points. Like Anatolios, I am a convert, scholar, and Eastern Catholic priest. Furthermore, I also share the discontent with which Anatolios begins his book, though perhaps for different reasons. He bemoans a loss of the experience of salvation. My own vocation as priest and scholar comes out of a frustrated wonder. As a college student, I set out to learn about this Church and its Tradition. I learned about the Sunday experience I was supposed be having. It was in university when I read for the first time John Paul II’s 1995 apostolic letter *Orientalis Lumen*, written to acquaint the wider Catholic Church with the riches of the Christian East. John Paul II dedicated much reflection to the “genius of Eastern liturgy,” emphasizing its power to envelop all our human senses into the fullness of the mystery of God. It is worth quoting in full:

Within this framework, liturgical prayer in the East shows a great aptitude for involving the human person in his or her totality: the mystery is sung in the loftiness of its content, but also in the warmth of the sentiments it awakens in the heart of redeemed humanity. In the sacred act, even bodiliness is summoned to praise, and beauty, which in the East is one of the best loved names expressing the divine harmony and the model of humanity transfigured, appears everywhere: in the shape of the church, in the sounds, in the colors, in the lights, in the scents. The lengthy duration of the celebrations, the repeated invocations, everything expresses gradual identification with the mystery celebrated with one’s whole person. Thus the prayer of the Church already becomes participation in the heavenly liturgy, an anticipation of the final beatitude. (§11)

The experience of this liturgy has been quite potent throughout history. It led to the baptism of the entire kingdom of Rus' in 988 AD. As the story goes, its ruler, Vladimir the Great, sent emissaries to find a religion fit for his kingdom. On their return to Rus' from Constantinople, Vladimir's envoys convinced him to accept baptism on behalf of the nation precisely because of their experience of the liturgy: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men . . . for we cannot forget that beauty."²

As a college student reading these texts, I noticed the dissonance between these commentaries and the experience of my own parish. My experience demonstrated little of John Paul's maximalist vision or Vladimir's emissaries' glowing reports. I was baptized into that experience. However, the fracture between the Church I read about and the Church I lived did not deter me but urged me on to exploration. I also recognized that, however imperfectly, the Byzantine Catholic Church lulled me into Christianity, not with its aesthetic trappings but with the loving hands of its members. Hence, "the dearth of soteriological experience" through the liturgy is something I know firsthand, which is why books like Anatolios's are welcome contributions. Normative statements derived from the liturgy are clarion reminders that liturgy must be cultivated and shared for very precise reasons: Eastern Catholics are heirs to a particular share of divine revelation, uniquely their own and meant to be offered to the whole Church.³ As the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, states:

The Catholic Church holds in high esteem . . . the Christian life of the Eastern Churches, for in them . . . there remains visible the tradition that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers and that forms part of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church. (§11)

Here, the decree speaks of a "divinely revealed heritage" that belongs to the Eastern Churches, in language that anticipates and compliments the

² *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, trans. S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), 111.

³ For further comment, see Andrew Summerson, "*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* as Proof and Itinerary of the Hermeneutic of Reform: Theoria and a Little Praxis," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 57 (2016): 135–44; Khaled Anatolios, "The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*," in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew Levering and Matthew Lamb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 343–49.

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, which describes revelation as God's self-communication with humanity. Revelation is God's language used to befriend us and offers us an everlasting communion with him (see *Dei Verbum* §§2, 6). Now, if revelation is divine communication, consider it as a sentence. Based on what is discussed above, the Eastern Churches have essential information to make this sentence intelligible. The traditions of the Christian East are no mere ornamental adjectives and adverbs. If that were the case, they would be left on the cutting room floor of the editor's office at the Vatican and the message would still get through. Rather, Eastern Catholics possess subjects and verbs indispensable for the proclamation of revelation. Without them, the sentence of divine revelation is at best incomplete, and at worst incoherent. The Eastern Catholic churches are tasked with communicating divine language effectively. If this is not done, it is a frightening prospect, since the Eastern Catholic share of divine revelation has an evangelical aim. The Eastern Catholic churches are under the obligation to preach the Gospel to the whole world (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* §3). Worship is one of the divinely inspired tools to facilitate this work. Several of the most recent Vatican documents highlight how liturgy is central to the Eastern Christian experience.⁴ Put another way, liturgy is not one thing Eastern Christians do among many; it is their primary activity, and the rest of life is built around it.

Nicholas Cabasilas and Healthy Liturgical Theology

Given what I have discussed above, the stakes are quite high for Eastern Christian worship. As a conduit of revelation, liturgy demands its execution in its implied idealized form in order to cultivate more "implied ideal worshippers." Such Christians are not meant to be exceptions, but the rule. Yet, Anatolios is careful to not let his approach devolve into what Matthew Levering has called "liturgicism," an exaggerated view that asserts that Christian revelation is available solely through liturgical experience.⁵ Anatolios recognizes the need for normative statements to be made independent of but consonant with the expression of liturgy he describes at the outset of his book. His examination of the worship described in Arius's hymns and Nestorius's sermons in chapter 3 offer cautionary tales of what can happen

⁴ See esp. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* §11. See also Congregation for the Eastern Churches, *Instruction for Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996).

⁵ Matthew Levering, "Liturgy and Trinity," *Antiphon* 23, no. 3 (2019): 225–60.

when a sheer “bottom up” liturgical theology goes off the rails.⁶ And yet, an anemic liturgical experience, even in its orthodox expression, is ill-equipped to nurture an experience of doxological contrition. When liturgy is misfired, undercut for the sake of economy, or made the fodder of political battles, it frustrates the expression divine glory that it intends. Further, even the most objectively beautiful liturgical experience can fall flat, for it requires of the worshiper a response of contrition, a posture uncomfortable for many. Not least for these reasons—and I suspect we can name others—we risk having the experience but missing its meaning.

In an effort to correctly narrate this experience, Anatolios turns to fourteenth-century Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas, a centerpiece of his book. In Cabasilas’s writings hang together a compelling vision of salvation born of the Byzantine liturgy and in dialogue with the normative scriptural and conciliar tradition. Further, Cabasilas is deeply indebted to Anselm of Canterbury. While some have been dismissive of Anselm’s influence on Cabasilas, one can learn much from Anatolios’s sympathetic and insightful exploration of these two seemingly disparate medieval authors. Anatolios brings into focus Cabasilas’s capacity to daringly name the ineffable experience of the Byzantine sacramental economy, which offers us nothing more and nothing less than life in Christ, a phrase which serves at the title of Cabasilas’s masterpiece. At the outset of the work, Cabasilas insists: “The life in Christ originates in this life and arises from it. It is perfected, however, in the life to come, when we shall have reached that last day.”⁷ There is a continuity between this life and the life to come. Liturgy puts skin on the bones of the petition of the Our Father: “May thy kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven.” But it is not any old life that is perfected in the life to come. He is explaining specifically the sacramental life, begun in baptism, activated by chrismation, and nourished by the Eucharist. The sacramental life prepares the palate to properly taste heaven. Without learning to appreciate heaven’s taste now, who shall be able to stomach it for eternity? Cabasilas goes on to say that, without this proper preparation to receive heaven in this life, eternal life would be but a misery. “The light would appear and the sunshine with its pure rays with no eye having been formed to see it. The Spirit’s fragrance would be abundantly diffused and pervading all, but one would not know it without already having the sense of smell.”⁸ Such an experience is not natural. Indeed, it is supernatural. This is precisely why

⁶ See Anatolios, *Deification through the Cross*, 169–77, 190–207.

⁷ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. Carmino J. DeCatanaro (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press: 1974), 43.

⁸ Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 43.

Christ comes to earth, to habituate the human eye to receive him, whom the Letter to the Hebrews insists “is the brightness of God’s glory, and the express image of his substance” (1:3). The Lord’s earthly face allows us to shake the sleep from our eyes, ease our squinting pupils to take him in for who he is: “the dawn from on high” (Luke 1:78; cf. the troparion hymn for the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord). It is here that the psalmist’s prophecy is fulfilled, repeated daily at matins in the Byzantine tradition: “In your light, we shall see light” (Ps 35:9 LXX; cf. the Great Doxology of Matins).

But Cabasilas makes clear that Christ as the light is not simply present to us, teaching us from without. More fundamentally, he unites himself to us from within.⁹ Cabasilas explains that, in liturgy, union with Christ exceeds the unity in friendship, even the unity between soul and body.¹⁰ The unity offered to us when we become adopted sons and daughters of God requires a revision of language. For us, the term “adoption” entails an artificial and derivative form of kinship. Yet Cabasilas tells us that divine sonship offered in baptism is more intimate than natural sonship. In natural birth, we are endowed with the flesh and blood of our birth parents. After that, what was once in our parents’ genes becomes our private property. Yet in Christ’s donation of his body and blood, we become “flesh from his flesh and bones from his bones,” echoing Adam’s first words, a love poem for his bride.¹¹ Cabasilas will tell us that union with Christ exceeds that of marriage. He will even go so far as to say that the life in Christ offered through the sacraments exceeds even the disciples’ experience with Christ during his time on earth. They stood shoulder to shoulder with him, yet through the sacramental life of worship, we Christians stand inseparable from him. It is only with the descent of the Paraclete at Pentecost, which Cabasilas describes as a baptism of the Holy Spirit, that the disciples know the unity that is accomplished through the sacraments.¹²

Eastern Christian worship is a celebration of this life in Christ and presents this life to us in continued doxology, a constant lifting up of glory. We are merely offering up what we have received. The best and the only gift we can give back to God is the acknowledgement of what he has done for us. This is not simply a pious platitude, but a logical fact. What can we give that we have not already received? As the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is at pains to emphasize, God “brought us out of non-existence into being.” We are radically dependent creatures and do nothing apart from him. At the

⁹ Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 45.

¹⁰ Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 46.

¹¹ Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 127–28.

¹² Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 91.

communion hymn for the feasts of the Mother of God, the following verse from the Psalms is sung: "What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me? I shall take the chalice of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord" (115:15–16 LXX). Worship of God is shot through with *anamnesis*, the calling to mind of his salvific deeds. This is at the heart of the anaphora of St. John Chrysostom. The deacon sums up this offering through ritual action by lifting the gifts, while the priest prays the following: "Remembering therefore this saving command and all that has come to pass in our behalf: the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand, and the second coming in glory, offering to you, yours, of your own always and everywhere."¹³ Notice the words as the chalice is uplifted: we offer "to you" that is, to God; we offer "yours," that is, the works performed on our behalf; we offer "of your own," that is, every created reality which belongs to him as creator and redeemer, symbolized by the bread and wine. Melkite theologian Jean Corbon calls the Eucharistic chalice at this moment in the liturgy "the cup of synthesis," where everything comes together and is offered back to the Lord.¹⁴ A thanksgiving offering to whom we owe our entire being requires something of infinite value to adequately respond. Christ's self-donation in his life and death offers the only content adequate to the task.¹⁵

In *Deification through the Cross*, the most difficult work Anatolios executes is not his erudition, though he offers much in his more than four hundred pages. Rather, Anatolios translates the first-person experience of the ineffable into a third-person voice. Anatolios's performance of this task is potent enough to dissolve the inaccuracies and obscurities brought about by "models" of salvation and false dichotomies between East and West. These concepts hang around like asbestos: too cancerous to keep using, yet too costly to remove. Such clichés serve only to insulate us from the burden of thinking. In their place, Anatolios lays forth yet another burden, the weight of the glory of the Lord, one that costs us nothing less than everything if we are to bear "all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). N.V

¹³ *The Divine Liturgy of Our Holy Father St. John Chrysostom* (Pittsburgh, PA: Byzantine Seminary Press, 2006), 74.

¹⁴ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), esp. 150–54.

¹⁵ See Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 117–20, and Anatolios, *Deification through the Cross*, 340–74.