

Basil, Bishop of Sergievo

The Making of a Priest in the Byzantine Tradition

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In the Orthodox tradition no provision is made for the ordination of a priest. One ordains either a high priest, a presbyter, or a deacon. In any case, it is the Holy Spirit who ordains, not the bishop. In the Greek and Slavonic originals we find expressions like 'you sanctified high priests', although this is usually translated imprecisely into English as 'Thou hast consecrated bishops'.

The consecration of a bishop thus assumes a close link with the Old Testament high priesthood and develops it liturgically.

After his election, on the eve of consecration, the candidate is invited to stand on the orlets, the small circular carpet bearing the image of a single-headed eagle flying over the walls of a city. Only a bishop is allowed to stand on the orlets while celebrating, and thus its use here implies that God has already marked out the candidate as a bishop before his consecration.

The next morning, the candidate, wearing presbyteral vestments, stands at the altar, whilst the consecrating bishops stand in the middle of the church. They enter the sanctuary at the Little Entrance, and the deacon, who has been censuring the presiding bishop as he enters, hands him the censer and he then censes the altar and sanctuary. The bishops pass behind the altar to their thrones in the apse. The *Mystagogia* of Maximus the Confessor explains that the bishop's coming into the church represents the Son of God coming into the world, while his passing into the sanctuary to ascend his throne represents the ascension and enthronement of Christ. The consecration service of a bishop thus represents liturgically the candidate being taken into the heavens and enthroned.

In the Russian practice, the presiding bishop blesses during the 'Thrice Holy' with a two-branched candlestick (i.e. he represents the God-man, Christ), while after he has ascended the throne he blesses with the three-branched candlestick (i.e. he is one of the Trinity).

The bishops then descend to surround the altar, and the candidate is led in to kneel on both knees directly before the altar. (A presbyter kneels on both knees, a deacon on his right knee only, both at the side of the altar to indicate that they serve the bishop who stands as high priest before God). A Gospel is opened over the candidate's head, written side downwards, and the presiding bishop reads the first prayer. In this, and in the litany and prayer that follow, high priesthood is mentioned five times.

The candidate is then vested and the ordaining bishops greet him with a kiss. Afterwards the new bishop ascends to his throne behind the altar and for the first time blesses the people using both hands (a presbyter blesses with one hand only). Liturgically, the new bishop has ascended into heaven and joined Christ at the right hand of the Father. The printed texts for the consecration do not now include the prayers for vesting, but when a bishop is vested in the centre of a church before the Liturgy, special verses of Scripture are used:

- With the stikharion, a white, sleeved garment, originally of linen, Isaiah 61.10, is intoned. The Targum specifically links Isaiah's 'robe of righteousness and garment of salvation' to the vestment of the high priest.
- With the epitrahelion, or stole, Psalm 132.9 (English Ps.133) is used, 'the myrrh on the head of Aaron'. With the girdle a form of Psalm 17.32ff (English Ps 18) is chanted, thereby introducing a royal element and combining the roles of king and high priest.
- With the right cuff, Exodus 15.6ff, 'the right hand of the Lord'; with the left cuff, Psalm 118.73 (English Ps 119) 'thy hands have made and fashioned me'. (Compare Irenaeus's reference to the Son and the Spirit as 'the two hands of God'.)
- With the palitsa, a diamond-shaped piece of stiffened cloth hung by a cord from the shoulder on the right side, Psalm 44.3-5(English Ps.45) is used, 'gird thy sword', another royal element, perhaps to linked to the sharp two-edged sword of the Son of Man in Rev.1.12ff.
- With the sakkos, a kaftan-like garment, Psalm 131.9 (English Ps.132), modified to read: 'Thy [high] priests shall clothe themselves'.
- With the omophorion (the pallium of the Western Church): 'Thou hast taken upon Thy shoulders our human nature that had gone astray, and hast ascended to heaven, bearing it to God and Father'. This differs from Philo's understanding of the high priest, that he was no longer a man when he entered the holy of holies (On Dreams II.189,231). The Byzantine bishop, like Christ, puts on human nature and carries it with him to his throne in heaven.
- After the cross and panaghia have been put around the bishop's neck, the mitre is set on his head while the deacon chants a form of Psalm 20.3ff (English Ps.21). At the front of the mitre there is normally an icon of Christ, with a cross in his halo and the words ho on, 'He Who Is', the Septuagint translation of the Name of the Lord revealed to Moses (Exodus 3.14). The high

priest of Israel also wore the Name on his forehead, engraved on a gold seal (Exod.28.36). Maximus the Confessor explains that what one finds in the Old Testament is a shadow (skia) of the Truth, while the new dispensation in an icon (eikon) of the Truth in that it is closer to the reality, in this case, Christ.

- After his consecration, the new bishop stands in the middle of the church and receives his staff (zhezl). This is not like a Western crozier, but has two serpents twined around it, not unlike the caduceus, or messenger's wand. He is an angelos, one of the earliest titles of Christ. No verse of Scripture is associated with the giving of the staff.

Whoever composed the Byzantine consecration service had a consistent view of what he was doing. The man chosen by the Holy Spirit is made high priest, king and shepherd. The new bishop passes from earth to heaven, and joins the Liturgy of heaven in his new role. The orlets, the eagle on which he stands, seems to indicate the mystical heights to which he is carried (Isa. 40.31), and reminds one of the woman in Revelation 12.14 and of Jesus' sayings: 'where I am, there shall my servant be also' (John 12.26); and 'that they also whom thou hast given me, should be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory' (John 17.24).

This is not the eschatological future, but a present reality that is given expression in the Liturgy. The Byzantine service for the consecration of a bishop has its roots in the oldest strata of the New Testament and ultimately in the worship of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is only within the framework of Temple worship that it can be understood. Indeed, it preserves aspects of Temple tradition that would not have been independently available to Christians living in later centuries. The oldest MS text of the service belongs to the ninth century, but the service reflects Maximus's understanding of Liturgy in the seventh century. It also reflects the world of Dionysius the Areopagite in the sixth century. Other aspects are attested in the fourth century Fathers, while the spirit of the prayers can be traced back to the Apostolic Tradition at the beginning of the third century. What is most striking, however, is that the service expresses liturgically the understanding of the word of Christ that is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews.