

Archbishop Lazar Puhalo
SYMBOLISM, RITUAL AND REVELATION

I. Orthodox types and symbols

When Donald Hebb released his seminal paper on neuroplasticity in 1947-1948, he radically changed the way learning was perceived. Perhaps we should rather say that he set in motion a whole series of developments that produced new and deeper understandings about the whole function of the brain, shed light on the mind and provided a profound insight into revelation and the meaning of ritual and symbolism. Orthodox Christians may find it interesting to note that the fathers and mothers of early monasticism had already perceived the principles of neuroplasticity without having any of the physiological or scientific information about the brain. What they understood was the profound link between the spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of mankind.

God and His works are not to be understood by fallen human concepts and rationalism. God spoke to Israel offering iconic types and imagery that led the holy nation to a spiritual understanding of the awesome mysteries and did not permit them to identify their expectation with earthly and limited expressions. In the same way, our holy fathers offered an apophatic theology carefully setting signs, types and symbols to establish a boundary for us on the true path, but never delimiting the mystery in a frame of words that would diminish the Will of God and His revelation to the likeness of a legal document. No theology is according to the Orthodox Faith if it is not based on those valid types and symbols which we have received in our Sacred Tradition. In the Holy Seventh Ecumenical Council, the holy fathers clearly dogmatised that valid icons are the equivalent of true theology. Valid icons consist in types and symbols, not in interpretations of reality by the fallen human mind. All elements of a canonical icon are symbolic and contain a profound revelation; there are no naturalistic elements in this Liturgical art.

No theology can be valid and sound unless it is based first of all on the icon that God offers in the first pages of the book of Genesis: God created man according to His likeness, one nature revealed in many persons, as the one divine nature is revealed in three distinct hypostases. He created man to live in the likeness of His own life. That life is revealed to us in types and symbols, for God, and from Him the Holy Church, clearly have understood that mankind's mind and its brain, his knowledge and his language are all symbolic, that language develops on the matrix of vision, and that even what we see enters the brain and is processed in symbolic images. It is interpreted by the mind in the brain symbolically and the concepts attached to this symbolic unfolding constitute the meaning that one gives to all things.

The Orthodox Christian liturgical services and the symbolism that they contain are also expressions of such a deep understanding. While rationalists have not been able to grasp the significance of this, it is an example of the profound depth of the revelation contained in Orthodox worship. This being the case, it is especially

disturbing to see so many of our teachers and priests advocating an abandonment of the types and symbols that have been given to us through the holy fathers, and especially by the liturgists, of the Orthodox Church. In particular, there are writers in our era who complain about the symbolism given to actions in the Divine Services and to various elements of the furnishings in the altar. They decry the symbolism attached to the chalice covers, the aer, the rapidé and other items used in the liturgy. Some wish to abolish the iconostas altogether, or at least the Royal Gates. In attempting to abolish the symbolic elements of worship, they would lead us on the path to meaninglessness. Let us recall that it was just such "liturgical reform" that left many mainline churches even emptier of significance and meaning than they had been at the beginning of the 20th century. Let us recall also how many of these same churches now permanently close each week.

We will give some concrete examples of the falsehoods that develop within the Church when the wisdom and understanding of the great liturgists, including St. Symeon of Thessaloniki, are disregarded, or even unknown to priests, hierarchs and teachers in the Church.

II The Human Need For Symbolism and Ritual

Recently, near our monastery, a seventeen years old girl was killed in an auto accident. She had been speeding and lost control of her car. By evening, there were dozens of candles burning beneath the tree into which she had crashed. Mounds of flowers, cards and notes appeared, and someone placed a wooden cross against the tree with her name on it. A month later, candles are still being lit at the site. Some time ago, Father Moses and I travelled to a small city in the northeastern part of our province to serve a funeral for a young Orthodox man who had drowned on a fishing trip. Of the approximately 250 people who attended the funeral, many of them classmates from the young man's school, not more than a dozen were Orthodox. The people were either Protestant or of no religion, but most of them especially the youth, brought candles to light. The majority of them took time to come and tell us how meaningful the Orthodox funeral service had been. Not a few of them commented on the penetrating symbolism in the words and ritual of the service. One young man commented, "I became aware that you were not serving for John, but were serving with him. It made me realise that he has a soul that is still alive." At an earlier funeral which we served in another town, the warden of the United Church was present. Afterward he remarked, "I was so struck to realise that you were serving the funeral with the deceased, rather than for her." The symbolic actions in the service had clearly penetrated the man's understanding, even though his denomination has almost totally renounced any form of symbolism in worship. We have seen this deep human need for symbolism so many times before and in history as well. When symbolism in worship and in life are missing, people create their own and respond to it. When the symbolism they adopt is not divinely inspired and rooted in the Sacred Tradition of Christianity, it often incorporates pagan ideas and folds into the "New Age Movement." Such symbolism and symbolic actions so profoundly convey and establish spiritual, emotional and cultural concepts,

knowledge and values that no society or culture is without them. Symbolic actions and symbolism in worship arising from the Sacred Tradition and experience of the Holy Church help maintain the doctrine and inner life of the Christian faith. The Orthodox Church has always understood this. Without symbolic actions and symbolism in divine services, both teachings and worship become the sterile reserve of dry intellectualism. Indeed, some of our own intelligentsia advocate that we abandon the idea of symbolism and symbolic understandings in the Divine Liturgy, Vespers and Matins, and render them as concrete and sterile theological intellectualisms, accessible only to scholastic, rationalistic minds. In this way, they would become external and lack the power to penetrate the soul the way symbolic understandings do. Human language is symbolic. It conveys information, concepts, ideas and values in a symbolic manner. Language developed on the matrix of vision. This is clear both physiologically and theoretically. Vision transfers patterns and reflections of light into symbolic images in the brain. Words are symbols whose meanings are established by cultural, religious or legal norms. Defined symbolism can be grasped and understood even by simple, uneducated people for whom concrete intellectualised and philosophically elegant refinements are completely inaccessible. So too are the sophisticated abstractions so often expressed by theologians. The Liturgy, we know, is eschatological; it carries us into the eternal wedding banquet of the Heavenly Bridegroom.

Fine, but what has this to say about the daily struggle of the ordinary Orthodox Christian worshipper? What visible symbolism can the overworked, stressed and harassed daily commuter, concerned about his or her mortgage, the needs and education of their children, coping with taxes, maintaining a home and automobile, and now trying to pay for gasoline, find in the Liturgical cycle, that is easily accessible to them and elevating to their souls in a straightforward way that they can comprehend? Is the Orthodox faith and worship ultimately only truly accessible to the intellectual and his remote, abstract understandings and interpretations? This is why there are clearly symbolic actions in the divine services, and symbolism in both iconography and the structure of the Orthodox temple and in particular, in the altar. Our philosophical rationalists may claim that such symbolism is not needed and that interpretations of the Liturgy expressing the symbolic aspects of it are "accretions," but this only proves the point that meaning is conveyed symbolically. They may be able to offer a highly refined and elegant philosophical concept of the Liturgy, but their hearts might never be penetrated with its actual meaning which underpins the daily spiritual struggle of the sincerely pious faithful

III Symbolism and Neuroplasticity: the work of the mind in the brain.

This essay is not being written for every level of reader. It is intended to respond to a stream of rationalism which is drawing a kind of Episcopalization or "liturgical reform" movement within the Orthodox Church. There are a many of such rationalists who would lead us on the same path that the Anglican-Episcopalian Churches have gone upon. Reductionism and minimalism in the divine services and the liturgical cycle have had a deeply negative effect everywhere they have been

instituted. It is the connection between the Orthodox liturgical cycle and our liturgical art (iconography) and the structuring of the brain that we wish to examine. First, let us explain, as simply as possible, what is meant by neuroplasticity.

The Mind Can Reshape the Brain

This may be a startling statement to some people. For those who think that the mind is only a function of brain chemistry, it will appear antithetical. Nevertheless, the ability of the mind to rewire and restructure the brain is precisely what we are going to discuss. We are particularly interested in examining this process in connection with the liturgical cycle and the symbolic aspects of liturgy and iconography.

There are many, sometimes extreme examples, of the ability of the mind to retrain and restructure the brain. It takes a lot of work and dedicated focus. One of the primary sources of our knowledge of this process is stroke victims or persons with other brain injuries. If one part of the brain is injured, another section can be trained to take over its functions. The Arrowsmith School in Toronto specializes in teaching people to "rewire" their brains in order to overcome learning disabilities.

Repeated Actions and Words

It is through repetition of actions, phrases and words, particularly in fixed symbolic contexts, that this restructuring takes place. It is known that neurons and synapses in the brain can be strengthened by repetition, by repeated engagement of the neurons and neuro-communication. Neuro-connections can also atrophy from lack of engagement or use. Repeated acts and phrases can also have an epigenetic effect and can effect DNA. Repetitious prayer can, for example, activate genes to produce the proteins that change the structure of neurons and increase neuro-connections among brain cells. The brain functions in codes which are or construct symbolic constructs. Language itself is a form of verbal symbolism that creates images in the brain in an unconsciously understood interpretation.

Prayer and Liturgy

All that we have said in this brief paper is greatly simplified. Nevertheless, it should present some idea of why we use such repetitious prayers as "the Jesus Prayer," augmented by the repetitious use of the prayer rope. It should also lead us to a greater appreciation for the symbolic actions and repeated phrases in liturgical worship. Perhaps if we have some notion of the effects of these things, we can focus on them and through concentration, focus an intent of the mind, so we can experience the desired restructuring among the neurons, synapses and communicators in our brain. In order to accomplish this, faith, focus and commitment in worship and prayer are necessary. Attempting to reinvent the Divine Liturgy or expunge the symbolic understanding of it will undermine this

process and rob the Liturgy of much of its power to impact so profoundly on the mind, brain and spiritual heart of man. This would be a tragic loss ultimately resulting in a disunity and disintegration in the Orthodox Church.

To understand this better, let us remember that these changes in the brain are significant and powerful. Overcoming stroke damage may take years of focus and work on oneself, but the restoration of function dramatically restores the quality of life. Overcoming serious learning disabilities by utilising neuroplasticity also requires a lengthy system of retraining and restructuring in the brain, but the results can be quite dramatic. Not everyone has the patience or the strength of will and commitment to accomplish these things.

Regarding the liturgical services and symbolic features in the Orthodox Church, it is clear that an awareness of such capacities of mind and brain existed. Such an awareness would have had to come from the Holy Spirit because it was not until the end of the 1940s that an actual understanding of these features began to develop. Now that we do have more understanding of this, it is possible for us to focus on the symbolic and repetitious aspects of liturgy, prayer, and the Orthodox Christian lifestyle in a more concentrated and beneficial way. Generations of Orthodox Christians have received such spiritual benefits by osmosis in worship, prayer and spiritual struggle. Others whose hearts were closed to it, did not. We can also better understand why contrived liturgies and liturgical reform, such as the "Western Rite" and renovationism have no intrinsic spiritual power. Rather they are shaped by human passions and often degenerate into a form of entertainment or emotionalistic expressions of self-centredness. They require no real focus, spiritual struggle or patient commitment.

We realize that some will be upset that such spiritual growth and ascent has so clearly a physical dimension. This is a Gnostic attitude. The brain is the instrument of the mind and the mind is a function of the brain. Soul and body work together as a unified entity. They are neither at enmity with one another nor is either one complete in itself. Indeed, the brain must even be equipped with some inner construct that functions for an awareness of God and for spiritual insight. To imagine that our spiritual life is a metaphysical abstraction that is external to the physical body and its functions is sheer Gnosticism.

The Errors of Those Who Ignore the Liturgists

When we mention "liturgists," many people think of those whom we used to call "typikon commandos." There was a humorous reference to them, "What is the difference between a terrorist and a typikon expert? You can negotiate with a terrorist." This is not what we mean by "liturgist." We are referring both to Saint James the Apostle who gave us the Christian Liturgy, and to Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom who standardised the Liturgy throughout the Byzantine Empire, and also to the recognised authorities on the liturgical services, such as St. Symeon of Thessaloniki (the foremost expert and commentator of the divine

services) and Nicholas Kavalas. There are also completely authoritative comments on liturgical services in the Didascalion.

Let us examine just one very severe and critical error. There are a number of bizarre and grotesque tales about the meaning of the memorial services which we serve on the third, ninth and fortieth days following the repose of an Orthodox Christian. Of course, the services are not served for everyone. Soldiers who die in battle, people with no close relatives, those who perish at sea and those who repose far away from any Orthodox Church often have neither an Orthodox Funeral service or any of the memorials. If we were to accept some of the bizarre stories, some told even by saints of the Church, then we must conclude that all those people were taken to hell by demons only because the services were not said for them. This is the "magic formula" theory of the divine services.

The doctrinal statement of the Orthodox Church about these memorial services is quite clear, and expressed both by Saint Symeon of Thessaloniki and in the Didascalion. We serve a memorial on the third day because of the resurrection of Christ on the third day, opening the way for the resurrection of all mankind. We serve on the ninth day because the soul, unable to receive its reward of recompense until it is reunited with the body is kept by the nine orders of angels. We have a memorial service on the fortieth day because Christ ascended into heaven on that day, both Body and Soul, thus revealing that all will likewise ascend body and soul together. Despite such authoritative declarations of the Orthodox Church, we hear many gruesome tales about what takes place during the days after the repose of a person, and why they must be "prayed into heaven," or else the demons will snatch them. We hear tales of wandering souls needing to be prayed to rest and a number of other ghost stories. The adepts of such tales can rummage about in the early Church writings and find some disconnected "proof texts" for such stories and never stop to consider the irreconcilable internal contradictions that this creates in the established doctrine of the Orthodox Church. They never refer to the Memorial of Funeral services themselves, because they contain not a hint of any such fantasies. Nor do they ever refer to the commentaries of the recognised Liturgists of the Orthodox Church, because they give explanations that are diametrically opposed to such outlandish ideas as the Aerial Toll Houses, wandering souls or the necessity of never omitting a single word of these service, because to do so would endanger the soul (the "magic formula" theory). It is well, therefore to pay attention to the recognised Liturgists such as Saint Symeon of Thessaloniki and others rather than following bizarre stories. The symbolism of the memorials and funerals is quite profound and direct, and it is in this symbolism that we become spiritually educated and edified about the mystery of death and resurrection