

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH  
NOVEMBER 13, 2022---ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM DAY**

**“ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM----‘We give thanks unto Thee’”**

Twelve years ago, on July 18, 2010, what was hailed as “the greatest meal ever” took place in the Ruhr area of western Germany. Thirty-seven miles of an autobahn were closed down and set aside as a giant outdoor “dining room”. 20,000 tables were placed on those 37 miles of highway. Obviously, lots and lots and lots of food was brought in-----and 2 million people came and ate the meal. And so it was called “the greatest meal ever.” (“Our Daily Bread”, 4/5/12)

But we, in a little over half an hour from now, will eat a far greater meal. Physically, it will be a very small meal----just a spoonful! But it will be indeed the greatest meal ever consumed----the Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion, the very Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For this meal, on almost all Sundays of the year, we use the liturgy written for us by St. John Chrysostom who lived around 400 A.D. St. John is one of the very greatest Saints, one of the most important Church Fathers. He was the Archbishop of Constantinople. He is considered the greatest preacher ever; his nickname “Chrysostom” means “Golden Mouth”. (There are lots and lots of his sermons---volumes of them---waiting for you in our church library!). He had a particular care and ministry to the poor. And he was brave---he worked hard, against much opposition, to clean up corruption in the churches in the capital city. And he stood up (even when they were sitting in front of him in church!) to the rulers of the Empire when they did wrong. And they paid him back for doing that. He was exiled more than once---and finally in 407 A.D., he was sent as a prisoner far away to live in the wilderness on the northeast edge of the Roman Empire. The trip and the traveling conditions were too strenuous for him and he died before he arrived at his destination. The Saint’s last words were----“Glory to God for all things!”.

And it is he who wrote the prayers and hymns in the central part of the liturgy we use on most Sundays and holy days. With his beautiful and poetic language, he still leads us today in our worship of God.

Today, as we commemorate St. John, I wish us to look at one of the most important prayers that he wrote for our liturgy. It is on the top part of p. 41 in

your liturgy book. It is perhaps the key prayer of the Anaphora part of our liturgy. "Anaphora" is Greek for "lifting up". In this climactic part of the service the bread and wine (about to become Christ's Body and Blood) are lifted up to be presented to the Father. And we are called to lift up our hearts as well to God.

This particular prayer impresses on us how totally important the liturgy is-- --actually the most important thing we ever do in life! The liturgy, the Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion---it holds all of life together. Our own personal lives and the whole world is held together by it. And not just our own planet but the entire infinite universe! Our wonderful modern Saint Paisios said--- "The divine liturgy sustains the universe!". (Talk by Bishop BASIL, Antiochian Archdiocese Clergy Symposium, 7/17/18) A lot better than that strange highway meal in Germany 12 years ago....

In the key prayer we are looking at (top of p. 41), St. John tells us the main purpose of the liturgy 3 times---in just this one not real long prayer.

*First time*----"It is meet and right...to give thanks unto Thee."

*Second time*----"For all these things we give thanks unto Thee."

*Third time*---"And we give thanks unto Thee."

Sometimes an important statement is made three times to show it's really true! Triply true! So it is here----St. John says 3 times in this prayer that it is right for us to thank God---it's true, it's true, it's true!

And by doing this, he shows us what is the main purpose of the liturgy----- to thank God. That's why the "official" name for Holy Communion is the Greek word, "Eucharist", which means (you guessed it!): Thanksgiving. The main reason we come to the liturgy and receive the Eucharist is to give thanks to God. And just in case we didn't realize that, St. John says it 3 times!

In the Holy Eucharist, we thank God for creating us, for providing for us, for preserving us, for His sending His Son to die and rise for us, for giving us eternal life-----for bringing us to heaven, God's great and glorious heaven!

But look real closer at that prayer on p. 41 and you'll notice something---- St. John doesn't write in our prayer about how God will *in the future* bring us to heaven. He gives thanks to God that He has *already* brought us to heaven-- --right now in the Holy Eucharist, right in this room!

Notice how he speaks in the past tense---

"Thou *has* brought us back to heaven".

"Thou *has endowed* us with Thy kingdom which is to come."

Past tense, not future tense. Happening right now, not later after we die. St. John says (and we do, too, when we pray this prayer....) that in the liturgy,

God is already bringing us to heaven, God is already giving us His Kingdom which is to come.

St. John was a genius with words. Don't worry---when he was writing the liturgy that has been prayed now for so many hundreds of years, he didn't get sloppy with his tenses! It wasn't accidental he used past tense instead of future tense---he meant what he wrote. Not that God will some day in the future bring us to heaven, but that it happens in the here and now in the liturgy.

St. John is saying that in the intensity and joy of the liturgy, we are not looking forward to going to heaven---we are already there! And that is why being in the liturgy, in the Holy Eucharist, is the most important thing we do in life.

Thank God, there are many wonderful blessings in life. But this one, worshipping God in the liturgy, tops the list! Because in the liturgy we get to go to heaven. It is most definitely the high point of life. And so we should make it the highest priority in our lives.

Father Lukianos was a priest in Antioch, Syria back in the 200's A.D. when our Orthodox Faith was still banned by the Roman Empire. (I know some of you are of Syrian background---maybe you're related to him!) He and some of his flock were arrested by the pagan officials and locked in a prison. Father Lukianos, probably because he was a priest, was horribly beaten, close to the point of death. And then to make his sufferings worse as he drew near to death, the guards chained him to the floor in the prison. He was chained down flat on his back, with only his arms and hands free to move. But he was awake and he could move his arms and hands! So he had a deacon, also imprisoned, arrange to have some bread and wine smuggled in. The other Christian prisoners stood around him in a circle, blocking the view of the guards. A cloth was placed over the chest of the chained down priest. And then Father Lukianos celebrated the liturgy while flat on his back, using his own chest for the holy altar! And all the prisoners joyfully received the Holy Eucharist that day! Father Lukianos didn't live much longer (he is *Saint Lukianos*), but he and the other prisoners had their priorities right---participate in the Divine Liturgy no matter what! (*The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dom Gregory Dix, Continuum, 2008, p. 152)

When on a Sunday morning we feel like sleeping in, or we're just "too busy" or for whatever reason we are tempted to not attend the liturgy---we should remember Father Lukianos---not even being chained to the floor and

about to die from his beating kept him from the Holy Eucharist. Always remember him and follow his example. For Father Lukianos knew the truth that even while in a dungeon, he would be in heaven that day---not because physical death was approaching but because of the Holy Eucharist!

So make this---to be present at the Holy Eucharist---your highest priority in life. Because being here and participating in the worship and receiving Holy Communion means a time of great rejoicing as you enter, here and now, into the fulness of the kingdom of heaven.

And that's why St. John Chrysostom, over and over again, in this one Anaphora prayer, tells us (3 times!)---"Give thanks unto the Lord!" Why give thanks go God so much in the liturgy? Because it is so good to go to heaven!