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# **Priest - Celebrant of the Cosmic Sacrament: Some Reflections on Holy Eucharist and Priestly Ministry**

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**Abstract:** The Eucharist symbolizes the cosmotheandric mystery, and it is seen as a cosmic sacrament. Priests are the celebrants and stewards of this, and their ministry includes the preservation of the cosmotheandric order. The cosmotheandric covenant between God, humans and the cosmos is renewed and strengthened in the Holy Eucharist. The Eucharist reminds one and all of our duties towards our environment.

**Keywords:** Priest, cosmic sacrament, Eucharist, cosmotheandric order, environment, ecology, mystery.

## **Introduction**

Environment is God's gift to human beings. The cosmos is the divine sacrament through which the divine presence and bounty are manifested. There is an inherent and inevitable relation between God, human beings and the cosmos and human beings are partners with God in this covenantal relationship. "The salvation of (hu)man and the transformation of nature are one, since in the thought of the Greek fathers (hu)man is a "microcosm" whose destiny is inseparably connected with that of creation."<sup>1</sup> This interrelatedness is well expressed in the **cosmotheandric vision**.<sup>2</sup> The whole creation which is the *macrocosm* is intimately and inseparably connected with

humans – the *microcosm*. The destiny of the universe is in the hands of humans who co-work with God to lead it to fulfillment. The Holy Eucharist symbolizes this *cosmotheandric mystery* and it is the cosmic sacrament where God and humans meet. Priests who are the celebrants of this cosmic sacrament are stewards and co-workers of God and are called to be alert and vigilant over the whole cosmic family for the faithful preservation of it. In this era of ecological crisis, this vision has great significance.

In this article, we shall analyse the *cosmotheandric vision* in the light of the present ecological crisis and show how the Eucharist becomes the cosmic sacrament. We shall also analyse the role of a priest as the celebrant of the whole cosmic sacrament who is accountable to his Master for the welfare of the whole cosmic family. His priestly ministry is not only cultic but also prophetic which finds its expression in the *cosmotheandric spirituality*, embracing the whole creation with attentiveness and compassion.

## **World as Sacrament**

God is present in the world in and through the creative processes of the world. God's continuous presence is manifested in the world processes and everything in nature in one way or the other proclaims the presence and glory of God. In the Holy Eucharist the creative process, through which God recreates and saves the world is unfolding. The unfailing divine presence is throughout the world and God protects and maintains the world without falling apart.<sup>3</sup> Creation is the manifestation of God's gratuitous love and all creatures are products of the divine love and recipients of that ongoing love.<sup>4</sup> In that way,

every being is a *Theophany* – the manifestation of the Divine albeit in a limited way. If God is the Giver of holiness and the One who sanctifies, then the world could be seen as the sacrament of God. We can see this sacramental notion in two dimensions – symbolic function and instrumental function. In the first dimension, the world is a symbol for “it is a mode of God’s revelation, an expression of His truth and beauty which are ‘spiritual’ aspects of its reality.”<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the world is instrumental because “God is effecting instrumentally through it (world), what He does for men in and through it.”<sup>6</sup> The whole world could be seen as an instrument and ground of life. “The Earth, however, not only grounds reality, she yields reality. The Earth is fertile; she is the womb of beings. She receives the seed of the Divine and transforms it into abundant life. The Earth is where – and how – the Divine manifests its bounty and its power to man.”<sup>7</sup> In Genesis, the Priestly author explains to us that God Himself has declared that every aspect of creation is ordered and good.<sup>8</sup> The Oriental Theologian Alexander Schmemmann writes: “God blessed the world, blessed man, blessed the seventh day(that is time) and this means that He filled all that exists with His love and goodness, made all this ‘very good’.”<sup>9</sup> Corroborated by the Genesis understanding we can maintain that all things can be a revelation of the divine wisdom and goodness.<sup>10</sup> When we say that we are God’s creation we are affirming indirectly that God’s voice is constantly speaking within us and saying to us, ‘God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.’<sup>11</sup> In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, “Everything that is active, that moves and breathes, every physical, astral or animate energy, every fragment of force, every sparkle of life is equally sacred:

for in the humblest atom and the most brilliant star, in the lowest insect and the finest intelligence, there are radiant smiles and thrills of the same Absolute.”<sup>12</sup> According to A. R. Peacocke, “the whole world of creation, then will be good and the revelation of the Divine, and therefore, human had to do with one supreme Creator God, whose will was steadfast - and so the created order should in principle be a regular manifestation of the supreme ‘mind’ of the Creator.”<sup>13</sup> All the worldly processes are sacramental and the world is a sacrament of God’s continuous actions. In sacraments, especially in the Eucharistic celebration, we are using the natural things as the medium of God’s grace and we believe that the invisible grace is coming down to us through these visible natural objects. In the same manner the whole nature should be seen as the divine sacrament through which we receive the grace and blessings of God. The world is viewed as the *instrument* whereby God is effecting some cosmic purpose by acting on it. The world is our family where God’s continuous presence is felt.

Since God is immanently present in the world, the world is to be seen as the manifestation of God’s action. God is everywhere and at all times in the processes and events of the natural world, which could be seen as the vehicle and instrument of God’s action and as capable of expressing His intentions and purposes – as our bodies are agents of ourselves. A human being should have respect for nature, in the same way he or she has respect for his or her own body or those of other persons. We do not consider the body of the other as a mere aggregate of flesh, but as a person. In the case of the natural world, if it is God who is the agent, who is expressed therein, human attitude to nature should show a respect, which is

transmuted into reverence at the presence of God in and through the whole of created order, a derived sacredness or holiness as the vehicle and instrument of God's own creative action. In other words, humans have the sacred duty to revere the nature as they do to other persons.

### **Eucharist - A Call to Cosmotheandric Order (*ṛta*)**

In the Indian religious tradition, harmony among the Divine, human and the cosmic is well expressed in the notion of *ṛta*. *Ṛta* is the upholding of the cosmic order where God the Creator, the cosmos and the humans are in perfect harmony. *Ṛta* in its deepest sense means *dharma*, the right action and behavior, as opposed to *adharma* – the wrong and unnatural action. *Dharma* implies a fundamental concern and respect for the whole creation and includes a moral and social order and symmetry. The whole creation itself could be seen as a passage from chaos to order. Human beings are called to uphold this harmony in which all the forces of nature, from electromagnetic to divine, from angelic to human are intertwined and interrelated. The Holy Eucharist is the sacrifice (*yajña*) by which, the *ṛta* or the order of the universe is maintained. Sacrifice by nature is a *cosmotheandric act*, an act in which God and humans have to work together in order that the world be conserved; it is a cosmic act because the sustenance of the world depends on it.<sup>14</sup> The sacrifice, the sacrificer and the sacrificed meet together in the Holy Eucharist. The goodness and order in creation are celebrated in the Eucharist. It is well expressed in the *Eucharistic Prayer* by raising the offerings to God. “The divine liturgy – the continual ascent, the lifting up of the church to *heaven*, to the throne of glory, to the unfading light and joy of the kingdom of

God – is the focus of this experience, simultaneously its source and presence, gift and fulfillment.”<sup>15</sup> The Holy Eucharist is the climax of the triune oneness of Reality. All the three dimensions, God, the cosmos and human are brought together on the same altar of creation. The *cosmotheandric* covenant between God, humans and the cosmos is renewed and strengthened in the Holy Eucharist.<sup>16</sup>

### **Eucharist: Symbol of the Cosmotheandric Mystery**

In the Eucharistic celebration, the bread and wine placed upon the altar symbolize the whole creation. They act as vehicles of the whole world in its entirety.<sup>17</sup> The word “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word, ‘eucharistein’ which means thanksgiving. There is a predominance of the themes of praise and thanksgiving in the whole “Eucharistic prayer.”<sup>18</sup> In the offertory prayer of the Holy Eucharist we see this great notion of praising and thanksgiving: “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.”<sup>19</sup> In the Eucharistic Liturgy, the goodness of the Creator is acknowledged. The whole cosmic family offers thanksgiving to its Creator.<sup>20</sup> The Holy Eucharist is, in fact, an “offering back” of the whole world to God in thanksgiving.<sup>21</sup> It is the cosmic sacrifice or *yajña*, offered to God by the whole creation. The whole world is a God-given gift to humans whose task is to protect and conserve it. In the Holy Eucharist, we see this great symbolism of **cosmotheandric unity** which proclaims the interdependent, interrelated and harmonious structure of creation which is entrusted to human beings. In other words, Eucharist calls us to

maintain *ṛta* – the cosmic order through *dharma* – the right action. In the present ecological crisis this symbolism has got great relevance. Human beings, who are supposed to maintain the ecological well-being and order, go against the will of the Creator, and as a result there are so many climatic changes and disorders in the atmospheric conditions, such as global warming, tsunami, acid rains, ozone depletion, tornados, earth quakes, etc. Any laxity in maintaining this cosmic order or *ṛta* has an effect on every web of life and it adversely affects the mutual and intimate relation among God, humans and the cosmos.

Experience shows that the development in the physical realm makes humans more and more unhappy. We cannot claim that we are better or happier than our ancestors, though we have made all types of advancements in science and technology. Modern facilities and technological devices (at least most of them) make humans a foe to nature rather than a friend. Most of the modern technologies are provocative than evocative. They do not evoke in us any respect for nature but alienate us further from both God and nature. The distance between human beings, God and the world becomes wider and wider with every new scientific discovery. For instance, the splitting up of the atom in the name of scientific progress seems to be a cosmic abortion, which jeopardises the natural balance. For the sake of scientific achievements we experiment and explode atom bombs and launch missiles with high explosive chemicals which affect the rhythm and balance of the cosmic system. Nowadays, even the deserts are not deserted but they have become places of destructive experiments. Modern human beings want to have *mastery* even on the *mysteries* of the cosmos. They cannot digest the word “mystery,” forgetting the fact that

their life itself is a mystery.<sup>22</sup> They try *experimenting* on everything rather than *experiencing*. They seek the *maximum* over the *optimum*. Agriculture which was a kind of love-making with the earth has become *agri-business* – taking the *maximum* from a small piece of land, and exploiting the earth. Therefore, for the modern human being, the emphasis has gone from *quality* to *quantity*. The modern human being is always on the go and he or she thinks “the quicker, the better” in order to gain time. Acceleration is the great discovery of modernity. The most important characteristic of techno-centric civilization lies in having introduced acceleration, less in the mathematical-physical than in the global sense: acceleration of rhythms, of times, of all happenings on this earth.<sup>23</sup> Humans want to speed up everything including the natural processes. Nature has a spontaneous rhythm and we cannot accelerate it without causing harm to nature itself. This natural rhythm serves to keep the equilibrium of the cosmos. If this equilibrium is lost, nature cannot tolerate it, rather it will respond aggressively. This violent reaction of nature is manifested as tsunamis, acid rains, earthquakes, drought, flood, etc. The polluted atmosphere, the contaminated rivers, the stained seas, the extinct species, the exhausted natural resources and the denuded forests stand as plain evidence to this ecological disaster. All these show the human failure to live up to our vocation to protect the earth. As Vladimir Lossky rightly points out, “To the universe (hu) man is the hope of receiving grace and unity with God, and also the failure and fallenness.”<sup>24</sup> The present ecological crisis is, in fact, a result of the human failure in not maintaining fellowship, right relationship and harmony with God and nature.

Reckless borrowing against the earth’s exhausted



bounty is driving the planet toward an ecological “credit crunch”. Growing demand on natural capital – such as soil, air and biodiversity already outstrips the earth’s capacity to renew these resources by a third. If our demand on the planet continues to increase at the same rate, by the mid 2030’s we would need the equivalent of two planets to maintain our lifestyles. That is why it is said that *the earth is sufficient for everybody’s need but not enough for everybody’s greed*. A European Union study calculates that the world is losing between two and five trillion dollars in natural capital every year due to the degradation of the ecosystems. The world is currently struggling with the consequences of over-valuing assets. However, a more fundamental crisis looms, an ecological credit crunch caused by undervaluing the environmental assets that are the basis of all life and prosperity.<sup>25</sup>

The Holy Eucharist invites us to respect nature and cherish a fellowship (*koinonia*). It reminds us of the great truth that *nature is not a slave to be raped but a partner to be cherished*. The offering of bread and wine in the Eucharist reminds us of the *offering of the whole world back to God* in thanksgiving and thereby demands our sincere effort to make it a perfect offering pleasing to God. That is why the world is both, a gift and a task at the same time.<sup>26</sup> Any offering which is not flawless and perfect cannot fulfill the aspect of thanksgiving. However, an offering of thanksgiving is to be offered with an unblemished heart which seeks the welfare of each and every creature in this cosmos. This depends on a radical *metanoia* – a complete turning of mind, heart and spirit. The Holy Eucharist challenges us to take a radical turn back (*metanoia*) that would motivate us to regain the lost harmony and confluence in the whole cosmos. As we

partake in the mystery of the body and blood of Christ we become one with the *cosmotheandric* web of life and become partners of the mystery of creation. Receiving the Holy Communion the priest says silently: “In my hand I take you, Lord, who hold and sustain the universe in the palms, and on my tongue I receive you Lord, who rule the depths of the universe.”<sup>27</sup> This shows the intimate relationship - the great *cosmotheandric* unity between the Creator and creation. The Holy Eucharist reminds us of our connectedness with the Divine, manifested in the whole creation which participates in the mystery of the Eucharistic sacrifice in and through the natural symbols used.<sup>28</sup> The Holy Eucharist (*yajña*) demands from us a radical action (*dharma*).

### **Priest: Celebrant of the Cosmic Sacrament**

To be a priest means to be a *mediator*. So a priest has the sacred duty to gather together the offering of creation and present it back to God. “The priest is first and foremost the **sacrificer**.”<sup>29</sup> He is the one who can say “**thank you**” to God.”<sup>30</sup> A Priest stands at the centre of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing of God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God – and by filling the world with the Eucharist, he transforms the life, the one that receives from the world, into life in God, into communion. This meeting or encounter between God and humans is the centre from where one moves to God and to the world.<sup>31</sup> The Eucharist where humans meet God, is the sacrifice of the whole world to God, the intercession for the whole world before God. In fact, the ideal world is the one where humans and all the created beings co-exist in peace and tranquility. The Eucharist is directed towards the “whole” - to the entire creation and

the whole world. In this sense, a priest is an intermediary between God, human beings and the world. He is cooperating with God in the creative activity and fulfils God's purposes within it. He facilitates the re-bonding of the lost harmony and peace between God, human beings and the cosmos. He mends the broken relationship which is endangered by human greed and selfishness and brings about atonement (**at-one-ment**).

Being the celebrant of the Eucharist the priest is the minister of the whole cosmic sacrament. As it has been mentioned earlier, the Eucharist symbolizes the whole cosmos through which the divine love is manifested. The Eucharist challenges every priest to cultivate a sense of responsibility (**response-ability**) and duty to work for the welfare of the whole cosmos. In the New Testament we see Jesus asking his disciples to be watchful and vigilant for the whole household. The one who is managing the household vigilantly is well appreciated by the master and is put in charge of the master's possessions.<sup>32</sup> The whole cosmos becomes the household of priests who are accountable to the master and responsible for the able management of the whole household. A priest's responsibility does not end in the four walls of his parish or the church. He should not confine himself to the cultic ministry, rather his liturgical ministry should extend to the outside world which is the locus of his teaching and prophetic ministries. As the minister of the church he cannot be indifferent and impassive to the lost relationship between the Creator, human beings and the created order.<sup>33</sup> As a prophet he should be sensitive to the happenings in the outside world and must be able to read the signs of the time. Being a teacher, a priest has the sacred duty to conscientize people that the natural

resources should be used in such a way that immediate benefits do not have a negative impact on the whole cosmic web of life.<sup>34</sup> Serving the Lord and serving the cosmos are the two sides of the same coin. That is why it is announced at the end of every Holy Mass, “the Mass is ended, go and serve the Lord.”<sup>35</sup> It shows that the service to the Lord takes place not only in the Eucharistic liturgy (inside the church) but also in the service to the world (outside the church). Serving the cosmos is an extension of serving the Lord. When the priest utters the consecration words, **“This is my body, which is broken and given up for you”** and **“This is my blood which is shed for you,”** he becomes one with Christ Himself who has given His life for the whole world, so that the world has life and life in abundance. As his Master did, a priest also must be broken and given up for the life of the whole cosmic family. As a good shepherd, he has to sacrifice his whole life for the entire cosmic sheepfold. By the very nature of his special vocation he is a man for others. The whole cosmos is the altar and the Eucharist is the cosmic sacrament which symbolizes the **cosmotheandric mystery** where the priest sacrifices his whole life for the welfare of the whole world. A mystic like Teilhard reminds us of this great *cosmotheandric* vision as he writes in his book, *Mass at the Altar of the Universe*, “Since once again, Lord...I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the real majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all labors and sufferings of the world.”<sup>36</sup> A meaningful celebration of the Holy Eucharist should awaken in every priest a sense of the divine presence in the cosmos, enabling him to cultivate **a cosmotheandric spirituality** that revitalizes him to work for the well-being and integration

(*lōkasamgraha*) of the whole cosmos that is crippled and wounded.

## Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, we were trying to see the different perspectives of Eucharist and Priesthood in the light of the present ecological crisis. We have seen that the present ecological crises are human-made if we look at it through the prism of *cosmotheandric* vision which proclaims the undifferentiated unity between the Divine, human and the cosmic. We have seen how the God-given ecosystems were exploited by the human-made cultures and technologies. Human beings have exploited the earth for their own selfish motives and tried to subjugate it like a slave. As a result, the harmony between the Divine, human and the cosmic was lost. In this crisis, the Eucharistic sacrifice is the cosmic sacrament (*yajña*) which helps us regain the lost harmony and order (*rta*) through the right action (*dharma*). As the minister of the Eucharist, the priest is called to foster a *cosmotheandric* spirituality which would lead us to live a life of harmony, respect and love with humans, the cosmos and thus, with God Himself. It is a spirituality that listens to the groaning of the earth with compassion and helps us move into concrete action. This spirituality reminds us of our mission, sacred duty to be catalysts of spreading the ecological consciousness and asserts the sacredness (*sacramentality*) of the whole cosmos.<sup>37</sup> As a teacher, prophet and shepherd, a priest is the one who facilitates the cosmic harmony through a meaningful celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

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<sup>1</sup> Zizioulas, "Ortodossia", in *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, Vol. 5, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1980, 17.

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<sup>2</sup> This term is coined by R. Panikkar in order to show the radical relativity of The Divine, human and the cosmic.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Malankara Qurbono, English Taksa*(1986), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Psalms 136: 1-9.

<sup>5</sup> A.R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, 290.

<sup>6</sup> A.R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, 290. Brackets are mine.

<sup>7</sup> R. Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. Scott Eastham, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1983, 132.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A.R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, 279.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1965, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A.R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, 279.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgy and Eschatology", *Sobornost*, 7/1, 1985, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ursula King, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.: Selected writings*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1999, 46.

<sup>13</sup> A.R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, 280.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur, New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988, 164.

<sup>16</sup> Taken from the Message of his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, on the World Day of Peace published on 8. December 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Alexander Schmemmann, "The World as Sacrament" , *Church, World, Mission*, ed. Alexander Schmemmann, New York, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979, 217-227.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Malankara Qurbono, English Taksa*(1986), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Offertory prayer in the Holy Eucharist of the Latin rite.

<sup>20</sup> In the Malankara Qurbono, it is well expressed in the *Anaphora* of St. James: See *Malankara Qurbono Taksa* (2001), 44.

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<sup>21</sup> In the prayer before consecration, there is expressed so well the human duty itself of giving thanks to God continuously for the great gift of creation.

<sup>22</sup> Here, I remember the distinction between mystery and problem proposed by Gabriel Marcel.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993. 26: "Nowadays one thinks that the natural rhythms, the changes of day and night, of walking and sitting, of winter and summer – as in farming, for example – are no longer sufficient. One wants to progress faster. And the kind of acceleration resulting from this shatters the rhythms of the whole environment and of being in general."

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi –Watson, New York, St. Valdimir's seminary Press, 1973, 117.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Times of India*, Pune Edition, October 31, 2008, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Cumbria, Paternoster Press, 1999, 117.

<sup>27</sup> *Malankara Qurbono Taksa* (2001), 66. Translation is mine.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Siji Noorokariyil SJ, *Children of the Rainbow*, Delhi, Media House, 2007, 124

<sup>29</sup> The word "priest" is derived from the Greek *Presbyteros* (elder), and is, in the hierarchical sense, equivalent to the Latin *Sacerdos*, the Greek *Iereus*, the Hebrew *Kahane* and the Syriac *Kohane*. By the term is meant a (male) person called to the immediate service of the Deity and authorized to hold public worship, especially to offer sacrifice. In many instances the priest is the religious mediator between God and humans and the appointed teacher of religious truths, especially when these include esoteric doctrines.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Sacrifice and Worship" *Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann*, 129-135.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 116.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Lk* 12:35-48; *Mt* 24: 42-48.

<sup>33</sup> Pope Benedict in his message on the world day of peace 2010 asks: "Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss

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of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes, and deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions?”

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Eucharistic Liturgy* (Latin rite).

<sup>36</sup> Ursula King, *Pierre Teilhard De Chardin,: Selected Writings*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1999, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Siji Noorokariyil SJ, *Children of the Rainbow*, 108.