

December Reflection

Partakers of Mary's flesh in the Eucharistic Theology of St. Symeon the New Theologian

By Fr. Nathan Symeon Adams



St. Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022 AD) is known for his mystical piety, his explanation of the Divine Light, and also his deep reverence for the Holy Eucharist. Abbott Symeon went so far as to tell his monks “Brothers, never commune without tears.” It is no wonder, for this holy Saint knew that to fully receive all of the benefits of the life giving Eucharist one must be spiritually prepared, discerning the holy from the profane. After all, if the Eucharist is spiritual, only the spiritual man can partake thereof. One might think of it this way, a virus can’t survive on pizza because pizza is just not the kind of food a virus has the nature to thrive on. Only those with a spiritual disposition can receive spiritual nourishment; otherwise it is subjectively only wine and bread for those who don’t believe, even as when the Pharisees and Sadducees saw the Word of God incarnate they only experienced him with eyes of unbelief as a mere fishermen.

This emphasis on spirituality and the spiritual nature of the Eucharist does not mean that the Eucharist is not physical! In fact, St. Symeon believed so firmly in the physical nature of the Eucharist that for him to partake of the Eucharist is not only partaking of the incarnate historical Christ, but even to receive of the flesh which gave the incarnate word flesh, the Holy Theotokos. In other words, to partake in the Eucharist is even to partake in the flesh of Mary. By extension, St. Symeon might point out that Mary is not only our adopted mother in Christ, but actually we are her true children, even partaking of her flesh and blood. What is more, he did not see a radical distinction between physicality and spirituality. In keeping with the Biblical tradition, Christ’s resurrected body is a spiritual body. Yes, it can eat and drink, but it can also go through walls, float, and shape-shift (recall the apostles on the road to Emmaus), most of all it is an eternal and incorruptible body. The spiritual body of Christ is his resurrected body, a perfected physical body. This is the kind of Eucharistic body the believer receives when he or she partakes in faith, as a spiritual person. This is a foretaste of the good things to come, the blessed hope, the beginning of the spiritual man’s promised resurrection.