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From Symbol to Sacrament: Losev, Bulgakov, and the Ontology of Eucharistic Ecclesiology

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From Symbol to Sacrament: Losev, Bulgakov, and the Ontology of Eucharistic Ecclesiology

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the relationship between Aleksei Losev's ontology of symbol and Sergei Bulgakov's sacramental theology as a "bridge" to eucharistic ecclesiology. It proposes that Losev's account of symbol, name and myth articulates an ontology in which manifestation entails real participation without collapsing the distinction between what manifests and the manifested. Bulgakov develops an analogous structure with divine-humanity, Sophia and sacramental participation. The eucharist brings these concerns into focus: even as created materiality is the means of communion in Christ, the Church manifests a divine-human reality exceeding its empirical form. The article does not propose intellectual dependence between Losev and Bulgakov; rather, their comparison clarifies the ontological basis upon which Bulgakov's implicit eucharistic ecclesiology is intelligible, before the principle receives explicit ecclesiological formulation in Nicholas Afanasiev.

Key Words: Aleksei Losev; Sergei Bulgakov; Eucharistic Ecclesiology; Ontology; Sacramental Theology

The original synthesis of eucharistic ecclesiology in twentieth-century Russian Orthodox theology is properly associated with Nicholas Afanasiev (1893 – 1966) and his explicit identification of the eucharistic assembly with the Church. However, the theological conditions for this formulation preceded its explicit articulation. (Kisliakov 2026, pp. 13-14) In the Russian Religious Renaissance, the relationship between sacrament, participation and ecclesial being had already become part of a wider attempt to "overcome" the separation of divine and created reality. Sergei Bulgakov (1871 – 1944) was important in this regard. His sophiology, approach to the Church as a divine-human organism, together with his account of the eucharist as real participation in Christ, provided the basis for an ecclesiology in which eucharistic communion is constitutive. Though Bulgakov did not formulate "eucharistic ecclesiology" explicitly, its principle was present within his theology. (Kisliakov 2026, pp. 46-47)

The present paper approaches this development through Aleksei Losev (1893–1988). Losev did not develop a eucharistic ecclesiology, nor is the proposition here that Bulgakov's sacramental theology derived from him. The relationship between the two thinkers, however, was not merely retrospective. Losev began within the Moscow religious-philosophical *milieu* in which Bulgakov was a major figure, and, later recalling his student years, spoke of having known Bulgakov. (Kossakovsky 1989) The historical proximity makes their comparison less incidental, while providing no basis by itself for a claim of intellectual dependence. The significance of Losev, rather, lies in the philosophical articulation he later gave to ontological problems already central to Russian religious thought. His philosophy of name, symbol and myth provided an explicit account of how reality is present in its manifestation without being exhausted by it. Symbol for Losev, therefore, is not merely an external representation of an absent reality; it participates ontologically in what it manifests.

The argument presented here, therefore, is that this specific ontology provides a conceptual bridge through which the relation between Bulgakov's sacramental theology and eucharistic ecclesiology is seen. The problem common to symbol, sacrament and Church is participation – can one reality participate in another without distinct ontological identity or externality? Bulgakov provided a theological frame for this through divine-humanity, Sophia, sacrament, and the Church as the Body of Christ. The question becomes especially concentrated in the eucharist because created materiality becomes the physical means of communion.

The comparative analysis of the present paper, therefore, proceeds at the ontological level and is not based on historical influence. Losev establishes possible real manifestation; Bulgakov locates participation in divine-human communion; eucharistic ecclesiology discloses the ecclesial result. Read this way, Afanasiev's eventual theological formulation emerges not as an isolated ecclesiological innovation, but as the articulation of an implicit axiom otherwise present in the theology of the Russian Religious Renaissance. (Kisliakov 2026 pp. 293-295)

Losev and the Ontological Reality of the Symbol

On the one hand, the above-discussed historical proximity gives context to the comparison discussed in the present paper, but does not determine its terms. The connection pursued here is ontological, not genealogical. Broadly speaking, part of the philosophical significance of

Losev for Russian religious thought lay in his refusal to accept the separation of appearance from being. The concern placed him in the wider context of the Russian Religious Renaissance, even as much of Losev's mature philosophical work postdated Bulgakov's formative years. The comparison is also characterised by the fact that Losev remained in the Soviet Union while Bulgakov developed his mature theology in exile. Yet, the implications of Losev's philosophy extended beyond the historical separation; the comparison with Bulgakov is ontologically productive. Losev's philosophy of name, symbol and myth does not concern ecclesiology directly. However, it provides the conceptual means for articulating an ontology also salient to Bulgakov. How can what is transcendent be present to created reality without ceasing transcendence? This is important to understanding Bulgakov's eucharistic ecclesiology. The connection, however, is not one of dependence – the point is that Losev's philosophically-derived ontology sheds light on Bulgakov's broader insight.

Losev's major work, *The Philosophy of Name*, was written in 1923 and then published in 1927. In its preface, Losev brought greater systematic and dialectical precision to some of the positions that he developed in the work, even as he published the work substantially in its original form. (Losev 1927, p. 33) He identified the continuity of his dialectical method, which he regarded as central both before and after 1923. (Losev 1927, p. 33) Losev also situated this in regard to the phenomenology contemporary to him and the philosophy of symbolic forms, noting that he was unable to make use of Ernst Cassirer (1874 – 1945) when the text was originally written. (Losev 1927, p. 33) The chronology is important – *The Philosophy of Name* belonged to a time of Losev's life; despite this, it contained the dialectical understanding of name, meaning and reality that was broadly central to his philosophy.

Losev's understanding of symbol is vital. The symbol cannot be reduced to a conventional sign, the meaning of which is externally assigned. If this were the case, the relationship between symbol and reality would be extrinsic to it. The symbol would also refer to a reality beyond it. The symbol, rather, is itself ontologically grounded. For Losev, the symbol is not only conventionally related to what it signifies; it is constitutive of the dialectical relation in which manifested reality is disclosed. The distinction between phenomenon and meaning is thus retained without becoming opposition between unrelated orders. What appears is not identical to fullness; the appearance however, is not ontologically separate either.

For Losev, therefore, the "name" is not an arbitrary designation externally attached to a thing. It emerges from within in the dialectical state that culminates in the word as symbol, thereby affording a linguistic manifestation to an ontological – not only conventional – significance. Losev describes the "energy of the essence" as being "inseparable from the essence itself, but distinct from it." (Losev 1927, p. 150) The name, therefore, belongs to the structure of distinction without separation: manifestation does not exhaust the reality manifested. Meaning exceeds expression; meanwhile, expression participates in meaning. This is, also, the pattern of Losev's approach to myth. Myth is not fiction; neither does it attempt scientific explanation. It cannot be reduced to allegory or abstract metaphysical construction. In this regard, Losev's account differed fundamentally from the later semiological approach of Roland Barthes, in which myth operates as a second-order system of signification. (Barthes 1972, pp. 111–117) For Losev, myth was not primarily a structure through which an antecedent sign acquires a

further cultural meaning, but a mode in which reality itself is concretely manifested. Myth is defined personally and historically, culminating in its description as a miraculous personal history given in words. Myth, therefore, is concrete and lived; its meaning is manifested in personality, history and word, not as abstractions detached from them. The argument, moreover, has a contemporary dimension: in *The Dialectics of Myth*, Losev extended the argument polemically to Soviet materialism and communism, rejecting its claim to supersede myth. Materialist consciousness remained mythically structured, constructing its own account of reality, history and social transformation. (Losev 1930) According to the terminology of the comparison, this relation may also be described as participatory – its manifestation is neither identical with the reality manifested nor externally related to it.

This manifestation, equally, has the deep theological meaning that is mandated by Christian revelation. If transcendence and immanence were to be exclusive of each other, revelation is entirely, conceptually unstable. Either God is external to created existence – in which case divine presence is metaphorical – or the distinction between God and creation is weak. But Losev saw another possibility. Reality may genuinely manifest without being exhausted by externality. Participation does not require identity; rather, it presupposes the distinction in which what participates continues to be itself while sharing in the reality that exceeds it.

This theological point also has an applicability to the Eastern Christian distinction between divine essence and energies. According to Palamite theology, divine essence is inaccessible, while God is genuinely communicated through divine, uncreated energies. (Palamas 1983) The distinction prevents participation from being a merely ontological identity or external relation. While Losev's philosophy cannot be "reduced" to Palamite theology, his account of manifestation is developed in connection with the problem associated with Name-Glorification and Palamite reception. (Biriukov 2024) The invisible is not less transcendent by presence.

This is important to the present paper, inasmuch as eucharistic theology confronts the same problem in a concentrated form. In broad terms, the eucharist cannot be understood in the event that sacramental signs are treated as only external representations. Bread and wine do not only direct consciousness to an absent Christ; Christian eucharistic realism also necessitates the claim that Christ is genuinely present while the empirical forms of bread and wine remain. (Bulgakov 1930, pp. 3-46) Sacramental relations, therefore, are ontological before semiotic. Losev, in fact, connects this account of manifestation with explicit sacramental claims. Teresa Obolevitch, moreover, situates Losev's treatment of symbol in his account of Christian "absolute mythology," including the relation between prayer, sacrament and the realisation of myth in life (Obolevitch 2025, pp. 224–240). In Losev's own account of "absolute mythology," sacrament is placed in the context of divine-humanity, the eucharist occupying a privileged position as participation in Christ's Body and Blood (Losev 1994, pp. 210–212). The connection between ontological manifestation and eucharistic participation, therefore, already exists in Losev – the eucharist exemplifies in sacramental form the broader ontological principle that reality is genuinely communicated through its manifestation without being exhausted by it. But rather than treat it as anticipating the explicit formulation of eucharistic ecclesiology, the question becomes, does Losev's ontology carry ecclesiological weight?

Losev, to be sure, did not directly establish for Bulgakov or others their eucharistic theologies; Bulgakov's theological development in fact, preceded Losev's later philosophical writing, even while the relevant intellectual sources of Bulgakov were broader – patristic theology, German Idealism, Soloviev, Russian religious philosophy and sophiology. Neither is there evidence of there having been a direct line of influence on his philosophy. Losev, rather, articulated an ontology of manifestation that clarified the metaphysical basis of realist sacramental theology.

With this taken into consideration, the conceptual framework of the present paper can be stated plainly. Reality may transcend its manifestation while being genuinely present; manifestation equally, is neither identical with nor detached from what is manifested. This establishes the bridge from symbolic philosophy to sacramental theology, all while permitting a movement from Losev to Bulgakov. With the eucharist as real presence, participation in Christ is not only a matter of external representation. Its significance extends to being. Sacrament does not only express the unity otherwise established; it participates in constituting actual unity.

Losev's ontology of manifestation suggests this. The visible may communicate the invisible without exhausting it, much as the concrete bears universal reality without being identical to it. (Louth 2013, pp. 219-234) Applied to the ecclesiological framework described below, the Losevian account of manifestation makes intelligible the claim that the eucharistic community manifests a reality that exceeds its empirical and sociological form. The Church is not only represented at the eucharist; it is realised there. The movement from Losev to Bulgakov therefore occurs at the ontological level. Losev articulates real symbolic participation, while in Bulgakov's theological ontology, participation, divine-humanity and sacramentality converge, the eucharist being its concentrated ecclesiological expression.

Bulgakov: Divine-Humanity, Sophia and Sacramental Participation

On the whole, Bulgakov is useful to the present comparison inasmuch as the breadth of his work brings creation, divine-humanity, sacrament and ecclesiology into a single framework. His centrality to the Russian Religious Renaissance and developed eucharistic theology provide a useful test of the ecclesiological implications of Losev's participatory ontology.

With Bulgakov, however, the participatory structure described above receives a decidedly theological edge. His theological perspective, overall, developed from a consistent concern about the relation between God and creation. His movement from Marxism through Idealism to becoming a theologian, overall, did not eliminate the philosophical questions earlier pitched. The questions rather, were transposed into the new context. How could the world possess genuine creaturely integrity while existing in relation to God? How could divine transcendence coexist with divine immanence without collapsing one into the other? (Bulgakov 1945, p. 40) These questions were relevant to Bulgakov's sophiology, Christology and ecclesiology.

Bulgakov's concept of divine-humanity was central. In an important way, the relation between God and humanity could not be reduced to an external encounter between two self-contained realities. Its expression is Christ, in whom divine and human natures unite without confusion. (Bulgakov 1933, p. 20) Chalcedon is firstly a Christological formula; it is, equally, an ontological formulation. (Bulgakov 1933, p. 26) Creaturely reality is capable of participation

in the divine life without ceasing to be creaturely. This does not mean, however, that Bulgakov dissolved the distinction between Creator and creation; in fact, his theological project depended on its retention. Through this, creation possessed a positive relation to God inasmuch as it is created through divine Wisdom. Sophia was Bulgakov's means of articulating this. (Bulgakov 1945, p. 58) Whatever difficulties sophiology may have led to, (Nichols 2004, pp. 598-613) its purpose was clear – Bulgakov sought to account for the possibility of communion between divine and created being without reducing communion to identity or external associations.

This is where the comparison with Losev is especially productive. The relation between Losev and Bulgakov can be located particularly in their respective accounts of sense, manifestation and the symbolic character of created reality, a comparison otherwise developed by Obolevitch in her treatment of Losev's structure of sense and cosmic symbolism (Obolevitch 2025, pp. 197–204). At a fundamental level, Losev's notion of symbol manifested a reality that exceeds it. For Bulgakov, creation possesses the capacity to disclose its participation in divine reality. In every case, however, the material is not self-enclosed. Neither thinker is satisfied with an ontology in which empirical reality is exhausted by its own immediacy. The world has depth because being is participatory; Bulgakov's sacramental theology, in turn, follows on from this. In sacramental terms, this is not an isolated ecclesiastical mechanism superimposed on a non-sacramental world; it is only possible because created reality bears divine presence. The eucharist is therefore distinctive because created reality becomes the "space" of participation. In contrast to the doctrine of transubstantiation, which Bulgakov critiques in *Evharisticheskiy dogmat*, bread and wine become the mystical Body and Blood of Christ; material creation becomes the medium of actual communion with divine-human life. (Bulgakov 1930, p. 11)

For Bulgakov, therefore, eucharistic participation possessed a fundamental ontological character; this in turn, had direct ecclesiological consequence. (Antipina 2023, pp. 29-44) This concerns the nature of the Church because it concerns participation in Christ. The eucharistic community then, responding to the exhortation "Do this in remembrance of me", (Luke 22:19) does not remember an absent founder. It participates in the divine-human life. As a result, the unity of the Church cannot be understood only as organisational unity – the unity of the Church is grounded in communion. This is notable in Bulgakov's consistent understanding of the Church as divine organism and body of Christ, where the Pauline image of the Church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–27) is not only metaphorical – as the Church is itself authentic, the body of Christ; ecclesial existence is therefore ontological. (Bulgakov 1903, pp. 215–216) The Church is itself a divine-human organism, possessing historical and institutional forms. It is not reducible; empirical visibility manifests a reality that exceeds empirical organisation.

Here, the similarity to Losev's symbolic ontology is clear. Visible reality is neither dismissed nor absolutised; to the extent that the empirical Church is real, its reality cannot be exhausted by sociology, administration or canonical structures. Sacramental signs, likewise, continue to be material while communicating a reality that is irreducible to material description. The Church, therefore, can be understood ontologically through the relation of manifestation and participation. This is why Bulgakov is important to eucharistic ecclesiology, (Kisliakov 2026, pp. 53-145) even as Afanasiev afforded explicitness. (Afanasiev 1952, p. 5) Afanasiev's ecclesiology identified the eucharistic assembly as constitutive of the Church, as opposed to

“universal ecclesiology” (Afanasiev 1934, pp. 16-29), reflecting externalised episcopal unity. The theological conditions of this claim, however, were already there. The Church is divine-human organism; (Bulgakov 1945, p. 281) the eucharist, in turn, comprised real participation in Christ. This is fundamental. A theological principle need not be named to function constitutively. Bulgakov likewise, did not organise ecclesiology around the terminology of “eucharistic ecclesiology,” even as the theological principle was operative. (Kisliakov 2026, p. 39) This is consistent with the point of eucharistic ecclesiology in the Russian Religious Renaissance functioning mostly implicitly, (Ritschl 1987, p. 222), becoming explicit only in Afanasiev. (Kisliakov 2026, pp. 46-47)

In this regard, Bulgakov's contribution is especially significant because his ontology affords the implicit axiom philosophical depth. His eucharistic theology belonged to a wider continuity of thought where material existence, human activity and communion are related sacramentally. (Roosien 2020, pp. 71-88) The eucharist is not only an ecclesial activity among others; its broader ecclesiological significance follows from its underlying participatory nature. If Christ is communicated eucharistically, and if the Church is the body of Christ, eucharistic participation is not secondary to ecclesiality, but constitutive of it.

The point is sharpened by the contrast with representational sacramental understandings. If the eucharist only signified Christ, ecclesial unity can remain principally juridical or institutional. If, however, the eucharist is real participation, eucharistic participation manifests the Church’s unity as the Body of Christ. The eucharist, therefore, sacramentally manifests the divine-human communion of the Church. This is reinforced with Bulgakov's principle of divine-humanity. The existence of the Church participates in the divine-human reality. The Church, however, is not only divine; neither does human existence disappear into divinity. Communion is its basis. (Zizioulas 1985, pp. 15-18) This grounds ecclesiology in Christology. (Bulgakov 1945, pp. 281-282) The possibility of the Church is grounded in the possibility realised in Christ – divine and human life in communion.

This, finally, provides for Bulgakov's ecclesiology an eschatological dimension. The Church is historical, even as being is unable to be exhausted by history. (Bulgakov 1945, pp. 274-281) Its sacramental existence anticipates creation’s fulfilment and participates in it. Eucharist is concrete and eschatological. Material elements, a particular community and a liturgical event, thus become the site of participation in a reality exceeding temporal limitation.

With this accounted for, Losev's relevance to the present paper can be stated precisely. The specificity of Losev’s philosophy presents a conceptual account of how concrete manifestation has ontological depth without becoming identical to what it manifests. Bulgakov’s theology provides for an analogous structure to the relationship between God and creation, Christ and humanity, sacrament and divine presence, Church and kingdom. This also reflects the shared Russian philosophical-theological concern with overcoming the fragmentation produced by an ontology of external relations. This concern is also why the connection should not be reduced to symbolism. For both, the issue is of being. Losev's symbol matters because it is ontologically connected to meaning; Bulgakov's sacrament, in turn, matters because divine presence is real. The bridge is ontological.

The consequence of this for the elementary eucharistic ecclesiology principle is substantial. When sacramental participation is understood ontologically, the eucharist has ecclesiological weight. The gathering of the eucharist is not only an expression of institutional belonging; it is participation in the reality by which the Church is itself, preparing the transition from implicit eucharistic ecclesiology to the explicit formulation that emerges later on.

From Ontological Participation to Eucharistic Ecclesiology

In accordance with this, the relationship between Losev and Bulgakov can be conceived of as an ontological bridge to eucharistic ecclesiology, one that does not make the historical claim that Losev generated Bulgakov's theology. Chronology alone would prevent this conclusion. Neither does it depend on identifying identical terminology. The comparison, rather, discloses an ontological affinity – that manifestation can entail real participation without collapsing the distinction between what manifests and the reality that it manifests.

This structure is fundamental to the principle of sacramental realism. In the eucharist, created materiality participates in divine-human reality. The sacrament neither abolishes the material nor leaves it external to that which it signifies. Bread and wine are part of created existence; eucharistic communion is communion in Christ. The distinction between sign and reality is not eliminated; neither however, should it be construed as separation. This principle is applicable to the Church. The Church is empirically both visible and historically conditioned; it possesses institutions, structures, offices and social forms. These, however, do not exhaust its being. Inasmuch as the Church is the body of Christ, its visible aspect participates in the reality exceeding institutional description. Ecclesiology requires an ontology suited to participation.

In sum, Losev provides the account in which manifestation is not reduced to representation; Bulgakov shows why participation is intrinsic to the divine-human constitution of ecclesiality. Eucharistic ecclesiology, in turn, provides for the ontological principle ecclesiological form – the Church is eucharistically constituted in communion with Christ.

Afanasiev, in this instance, is significant in having given the ontological principle an explicit ecclesiological form. His distinction between eucharistic and “universal ecclesiology” focused on the local Church gathered in the eucharist, (Nichols 1989) maintaining that the entire Church is present in the assembly given the presence of the eucharist. The local Church, therefore, is not only a “fragment” that becomes the Church by its incorporation into an institutional whole. The catholicity of the local Church is realised in the assembly, (Afanasiev 1934, pp. 20-21) even as Afanasiev did not supply the ontology that makes it coherent. That said, pressing the question raises one. If presence is only representative, the local eucharistic community cannot bear the fullness attributed to it. The claim that the Church is fully realised in the eucharistic assembly, therefore, raises an ontological question: how can the fullness of the Church be genuinely present in an assembly without being exhausted by it? The relevance of symbol to eucharistic ecclesiology, therefore, lies not only in analogy, but in ontology of presence.

Bulgakov informs this conceptual bridge, inasmuch as he stood in the immediate context from which Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology emerged. Afanasiev's formulation developed in the intellectual *milieu* of the St. Serge Orthodox Theological Institute (St. Serge), where Bulgakov

had been influential. The relationship, however, was not always one of agreement. Afanasiev was disappointed by Bulgakov's reaction to his eucharistic ecclesiology, (Afanasieva 1979, I) built as it was on Afanasiev's understanding of ecclesial order as grounded in love, not juridical power. (Afanasiev 2007, pp. 255-276) Their methodological approaches also differed. Afanasiev was not a sophiologist; his scholarly approach was historically focused; Bulgakov's approach continued the mark of his Idealist past. Nevertheless, the eucharistic and ontological concerns of Bulgakov's theology were central to where Afanasiev's formulation was possible. Bulgakov's eucharistic thought, however, differed from Afanasiev. The significance lay in the implied eucharistic ecclesiological axiom ahead of its systematic formulation.

Bulgakov's theology treated the eucharist as participation in Christ and in the Church as a divine-human organism. (Bulgakov 1930, p. 11) These propositions already implied that eucharistic communion is constitutive, not incidental to ecclesiality. The category of the implicit axiom (Ritschl 1987, p. 222) is useful. Axioms function as premises that structure reasoning even when they are not repeated. With Bulgakov, the eucharistic constitution of ecclesial communion functioned in this way. The principle, in fact, was dispersed across sacramental theology, Christology, sophiology and ecclesiology, without being concentrated into a single ecclesiological formula. Afanasiev subsequently made this explicit.

Losev, however, added another dimension to the analysis, inasmuch as his philosophy helped to explain the ontological coherence of the implied premise that was involved. If the eucharist is communion, this is because sacramental manifestation is real. Losev's account of symbol provided the philosophical language for the movement beyond external representation. The symbol, moreover, is meaningful inasmuch as reality is present through it. Sacramentality intensifies the structure: what is manifested is not only meaning, but divine presence.

There are, to be sure, several limitations to this comparison. Losev's philosophy and Bulgakov's theology were, in themselves, distinct projects, while the structural correspondence identified in this paper should not obscure differences of philosophical method and theological purpose. In particular, the eucharist should not be treated only as an instance of Losevian symbolism, since Christian sacramental theology makes claims on divine action and presence beyond this. The comparison, therefore, is limited to ontological structure and does not itself draw equivalence between symbol and sacrament. The comparison is valuable when these differences are accounted for – Losev clarifies the philosophical problem; Bulgakov gives it theological and sacramental form. Both resist the assumption that participation entails either ontological identity or merely external relation. Between these lies communion ontology.

This ontological perspective is particularly suited to Eastern Christian theology. (Palamas 1983, III.2.7–10) The patristic tradition repeatedly describes salvation through participation – God is divine by nature; humans become divine by participation, without becoming God by nature or ceasing to be creatures. (Maximus the Confessor 2014, vol. 2, pp. 103–105) The essence–energies distinction provides an important articulation of this principle. Bulgakov's divine humanity also operates within this wider participatory horizon, (Bulgakov 1945, pp. 281-282) even as sophiological terminology extends him beyond conventional Palamite formulations.

The Church participates in divine-human life; it is united to Christ. Eucharistic communion, also, is its sacramental enactment; ecclesiology is therefore inseparable from ontology.

This further explains how eucharistic ecclesiology became more than just a twentieth-century theory of ecclesial organisation. If reduced to a dispute about whether ecclesial primacy belongs to the local or universal Church, this theological depth can be easily obscured. At depth lies the claim that the Church exists by participation in Christ. This is realised eucharistically. This ontological approach also helps account for the breadth of the eucharistic ecclesiology of the Russian Religious Renaissance. (Kisliakov 2026, p. 296) Its presence cannot be measured solely by searching for the expression "eucharistic ecclesiology"; Afanasiev's explicit terminology represents one moment in a wider development. (Kisliakov 2026, p. 46-47) Bulgakov's divine-human ecclesiology, Florovsky's Christocentric sacramental realism, (Dimitrov 2016, p. 101), and the eucharistic thought of other émigré theologians, altogether demonstrate different expressions of this common intuition. (Kisliakov 2026, pp. 232-290) The unity of the Church is known through participation in Christ at the eucharist.

Bulgakov, in this regard, is particularly revealing given his overall theological system, which consistently reinforces the participatory premise. His concept of creation is oriented to communion; his Christology gives communion its divine-human centre; his sacramental theology gives communion material and liturgical form; and finally, his ecclesiology provides corporate expression. The eucharist stands at the convergence of this. (Bulgakov 1930, p. 11)

Losev, viewed alongside this, provides vital philosophical clarification. The world is not ontologically mute; material and linguistic forms can manifest realities exceeding themselves; symbol is not the opposite of reality but a mode of its manifestation. Put alongside Bulgakov's sacramental ontology, the transition to eucharistic ecclesiology begins to become clear. The argument is not that Losev should be placed into eucharistic ecclesiology's genealogy as an unrecognised founder. Losev, rather, permits the philosophical structure that is presupposed by eucharistic ecclesiology to be seen. The ontology of symbol shows how manifestation is real without being exhaustive; Bulgakov's theology in turn, reveals how such participation operates in divine-human communion. Eucharistic ecclesiology demonstrates the result.

The bridge, as a result, is ontological in nature. From symbol to sacrament, the movement is from real manifestation to divine presence; from sacrament to ecclesiology, the movement is from participation in Christ to the constitution of the body of Christ; and finally, from Bulgakov to the Russian Religious Renaissance, the movement is from implicit eucharistic axiom to explicit ecclesiological articulation. Seen this way, Losev and Bulgakov illuminate a question larger than either individual thinker. Modern theology tends to separate ontology from ecclesiology, treating the latter mostly in institutional terms. Here, this is resisted. While the Church is historical and institutional, its unity is sacramental because its being is participatory.

The eucharist, therefore, is not only evidence of an ecclesiology developed independently of it; it is the event in which ecclesial ontology is also clear. The Church gathers, receives and becomes what it is through participation in Christ. It does not remove the Church's canonical or institutional dimensions. Theological order is established. Institution serves a communion whose foundation is sacramental rather than producing that communion by itself.

Losev's ontology of manifestation and Bulgakov's theology of divine-humanity also converge. Both provide resources for rejecting the ontology of exteriority. In Losev, symbol and reality are not separate; in Bulgakov, divine and created existence are distinguished but ordered to communion. In eucharistic ecclesiology, Christ and the *ecclesia* are neither identified nor externally related. The Church is the body of Christ through participation. The significance of the comparison therefore lies in what it reveals for eucharistic ecclesiology's foundations. The eucharist constitutes the Church through participation; this participation is possible because created existence bears divine presence, even as this presence does not abolish distinction between divine and created reality. For communion, identity is not a requirement. Losev provides the philosophical articulation of the first ontological movement, Bulgakov develops theological depth, and eucharistic ecclesiology discloses its ecclesiality.

This also explains the strength of Bulgakov's position between Russian religious philosophy and the explicit eucharistic ecclesiology of Afanasiev. Bulgakov's theology preserves philosophical ontological concern while locating fulfilment in Christ, sacrament and Church. Eucharistic ecclesiology was not an isolated innovation of the 1950s. It was the explicit articulation of a theological intuition embedded in the ontology of the Russian Religious Renaissance. (Kisliakov 2026, pp. 46-47) This further indicates that eucharistic ecclesiology is more than a twentieth-century theory of ecclesial administration. As Kallistos Ware otherwise observes, eucharistic ecclesiology is inherent to the Church. (Ware 2011, p. 226)

The comparison with Losev, moreover, helps to bring this intuition into sharper focus. The eucharist constitutes the Church only where presence is more than representation and communion more than association. The path from Losev to Bulgakov therefore is not historical genealogy, but ontological bridge. It reveals the philosophical depth of a principle that, in Bulgakov, was mostly implicit, and only in Afanasiev became explicit. The Church is most fundamentally known through participation in Christ. This participation is eucharistic.

Conclusion

Overall, the relationship between Losev and Bulgakov proposed here is neither one of direct influence nor of theological identity. It is ontological. Losev's philosophy of symbol clarifies how manifestations might be real without exhausting what is manifested, and how participation preserves distinction without becoming only an external relation. This provides the philosophical structure through which the sacramental and ecclesiological implications of Bulgakov's theology are visible. For Bulgakov, creation bears divine presence because the relation between divine and created being is ordered to communion. Divine-humanity gives it a Christological centre; sacrament gives it material and liturgical expression; the Church gives it ecclesiality. The eucharist, therefore, cannot be reduced to an otherwise established sign of a unity. In communion, the divine-human reality of the Church as the Body of Christ manifests sacramentally. In this way, Bulgakov's eucharistic theology carries ecclesiological significance even where later explicit terminology is absent.

This clarifies the subsequent development represented by Afanasiev. His contribution was not merely to introduce the eucharist into ecclesiology, but to make explicit a principle operating

implicitly within the environment from which the thought emerged. The local eucharistic assembly bears the fullness of the Church if participation in Christ is real, not representative.

Losev helps to reveal the ontology presupposed by the claim; Bulgakov gives that ontology theological depth; Afanasiev makes its ecclesiological consequence explicit. The movement from Losev to Bulgakov and from Bulgakov to eucharistic ecclesiology, therefore, should not be understood as genealogy. It discloses a shared resistance to an ontology of external relations. At its foundation, eucharistic ecclesiology makes a claim about being – the Church is known as the Body of Christ through participation in Christ, which is eucharistic.

The significance of this ontological bridge extends beyond the relationship between Losev and Bulgakov. It suggests that eucharistic ecclesiology is understood not only as a twentieth-century ecclesiological development, but as an example and expression of participatory ecclesial understanding. Its emergence within the Russian Religious Renaissance reflects a theological environment in which sacrament, communion and ecclesial being cannot be parted. Losev affords this a philosophical clarity, while Bulgakov demonstrates theological and sacramental depth. Afanasiev's explicit formulation, consequently, belongs in a broader intellectual and theological landscape, where eucharistic ecclesiology emerges not only as a theory about Church organisation, but as a claim about the nature of ecclesial existence itself. The Church is constituted through participation in Christ, which is realised eucharistically.

Declarations:

I confirm that this manuscript is my original work. It has not been published previously, is not under consideration by another journal, and contains no material that infringes the copyright or other proprietary rights of any third party. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged.

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