

# Our Liturgy Explained

## THE DIVINE LITURGY

At the Last Supper, Our Savior, Jesus Christ, instituted the greatest act of Christian public worship: The Holy Eucharist through which we receive the Precious Body and Most-Pure Blood of Christ. Eastern Christian theologians have called Communion the “medicine of immortality, the antidote to death”. This Holy Mystery provides the believer with the most intimate contact with God that he may have. Christ taught us: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I in him.” (John 6:56). Because God created humanity in His image and likeness, there can be nothing more natural for a human being to do than to enter into this type of intimate contact with the Lord.

Eastern Catholicism acknowledges the necessity of making Holy Communion an integral part of one’s life by offering it every Sunday (even more often during Great Lent), and on Holy Feast Days during the year, through one of three Divine Liturgies:

The Divine Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts

The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great

The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

The Liturgy celebrated least frequently is the Divine Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts. The Church celebrates this Liturgy on all Wednesdays and Fridays of Great Lent, and from Monday to Wednesday of Holy Week (that is, the week before Easter). The Liturgy is called Presanctified, because the Eucharistic Gifts, the Bread and Wine, are consecrated into the Body and Blood of Christ during celebration of the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday before the service.

The Church serves the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great ten times during the Church year, including the Sundays of Great Lent, and the Feast Day of St. Basil. This Liturgy is a condensed and modified version of a much older service, the Divine Liturgy of St. James, Bishop of Jerusalem (late first, early second century), which was about five hours long.

The most commonly served Divine Liturgy in the Eastern Church is that of St. John Chrysostom. At first, this Liturgy may seem identical to St. Basil’s; however, one will find major differences in these services in the prayers that the priest reads (in St. Basil’s Liturgy the majority of these prayers are longer than the ones in St. John’s Liturgy).

The “theology” of the Divine Liturgy is one of spiritual ascent. Many have described the atmosphere at a Liturgy as “Heaven on earth”; however, this is not quite correct. Heaven came down to earth when the Son of God became man. Now, because of Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven, the Kingdom of God does not come down to earth; instead, earth has the potential of being raised up to Heaven.

For the person who is willing to open his heart and soul to the spiritual dynamics of the Divine Liturgy, this mystical ascension is a very real event. Like the steps of a stairway, or rungs of a ladder, every litany, every hymn, every prayer and Scripture passage of the service takes us one step closer to the Heavenly Kingdom.

We begin our spiritual ascent by singing the earthly hymns found in the Old Testament Psalms, and soon we join the choirs of Angels and Saints in their heavenly “Thrice Holy Hymn” of praise

to the Lord. Eventually, we will ask that God, our Lord and Creator, accept us as His children and allow us to call upon Him as “Our Father.” We then conclude our spiritual journey to God’s Holy Domain in the Liturgy by approaching Christ Himself, the King of Kings, and partaking of His Precious Body and Blood. In this way, we unite ourselves with Him, and become heirs to His Kingdom.

Worshippers must understand that they are not simply an audience. As we read the prayers and hymns of the service, we will find two words repeatedly appearing, “WE” and “US”: “Let us pray to the Lord”, “We praise Thee. We bless Thee.” The prayers of the Divine Liturgy are our prayers; unless we actively participate in them, the mystical gifts, which the Liturgy offers, are ineffective for us subjectively. “Active participation” means being aware of what is taking place during the service while we sing, read, serve with the priest, or simply stand and pray the Liturgy in the silence of our hearts.

Active participation means praying to God when we hear the call “Let us pray to the Lord,” paying attention upon hearing, “Let us be attentive,” and making the effort sincerely to “lay aside all cares of life” as we sing the Cherubic Hymn. Most of all, active participation means being prepared to complete the Liturgical journey; that is, it means being ready to come forth and receive the Body and Blood of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ when we hear the call, “With the fear of God and with faith approach.”

The Holy Liturgy is structured such that the Eucharist, Communion with Christ, is its apex, its climax. Without participating in the Eucharist our spiritual journey ends without reaching its destination. Our participation in this great and awesome event is incomplete.

The Divine Liturgy’s Structure:

The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is composed of three sections.

- 1) The Liturgy of Oblation
- 2) The Liturgy of Catechumens
- 3) The Liturgy of the Faithful

Of these three sections, the second and third are most familiar; they contain the dialogue between priest and laity. The first occurs on the Proskomydia table in the left hand corner of the Sanctuary. It is only after it concludes that the priest opens the Royal Doors and begins the Liturgy of the Catechumens.

The Liturgy of Oblation:

The first part of the Divine Liturgy is the Liturgy of Oblation, also called “Proskomidia,” from the “proskomizo” meaning “to bring” – i.e., to offer. This name is derived from the traditional practice of the laity bringing from their homes the bread and wine to be used for Holy Communion, and handing it to the priest to prepare for the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Proskomidia involves the preparation of wine, water, and five loaves of bread called “prosphora.” The prosphora consists of two pieces of dough joined together (symbolizing the two natures of Christ: Divine and human) they are made of flour, water, and yeast. The Eastern Church uses leavened bread (i.e. bread which rises because of the yeast in it) for Holy

Communion as an expression of the belief that the faithful are partaking of the Body and Blood of the Resurrected (Risen) Christ.

The priest takes the first loaf of prosphora and cuts a large cube out of the center of it, which is marked with the insignia IC XC HI KA (meaning: "Jesus Christ the Conqueror"). This cube is called the Lamb ("Ahnets" in Ukrainian): it is this piece of bread that will be consecrated during the Eucharist.

After cutting out the Lamb, the priest cuts across into the bottom of it saying "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is offered as a sacrifice, for the life of the world and for its salvation." He then pierces into the right side of the Lamb, with the words, "One of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. He who saw this has borne witness about it, and his witness is true" (see John 19:34). Immediately after this, the priest takes the wine and water and pours them into the Chalice.

The priest then takes the second loaf of prosphora and cuts a large triangle out of it, commemorating the Mother of God, "Theotokos". This piece is placed to the right of the Lamb, with the words, "The Queen stood at Thy right side all glorious, clothed in golden robes."

Nine smaller triangular pieces are then cut out of the third prosphora, which commemorate:

- 1) St. John the Baptist;
- 2) the Prophets and all Forefathers of the Old Testament;
- 3) the Apostles;
- 4) the Church Fathers and all Eastern Church Illuminaries;
- 5) all Martyrs;
- 6) all the Monastic Fathers and Mothers
- 7) all Saints not concerned with material gains;
- 8) Sts. Joachim and Anna, the parents of the Mother of God; the saint or saints whose memory is being commemorated that day, Saints Cyril and Methodius, St. Volodymyr the Great;
- 9.) the Church Father whose Liturgy is being celebrated on that day (i.e., St. John Chrysostom or St. Basil the Great).

Pieces are taken out of the fourth prosphora for the bishop of the diocese, the civil authorities of the country, and all living members of the Church. Pieces are then taken out of the fifth prosphora for the deceased members of the Church. In Churches where the laity bring prosphora for the service from home, they will also submit, to the priest, a list of names of living and dead members of the Church, whom they wish to have commemorated during the Proskomidia.

Thus, through the Proskomidia, the whole Church is represented on the Diskos: the Mother of God, the Saints, the living and the dead, and at the center Christ, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world".

After preparing the Bread and Wine for the Eucharist, the priest censes them and prays, "O God, Thou didst send the Heavenly Bread, the food of the entire world, our Lord and God Jesus

Christ, the Savior, Redeemer, and Benefactor, who blesses and sanctifies us: Bless this Offering and accept it on Thy Heavenly Altar. O Thou who art Good and Loves mankind, remember those who offered it, and those for whom it is offered, and keep us blameless in the service of Thy Divine Mysteries.” He then proceeds to the front of the altar, opens the Royal Doors of the Sanctuary and begins the second part of the Liturgy.

#### The Liturgy of Catechumens:

The term “catechumen” historically referred to those individuals who wished to join the Church, but were first required to go through a period of education (“catechesis”) before their baptism and chrismation. Consequently, the Liturgy of the Catechumens contains those elements in the service that are used for teaching (i.e. the Epistle and Gospel readings, and the sermon). This section of the Divine Liturgy begins with the proclamation “Blessed is the Kingdom...” and concludes with the Litany of Fervent Supplication.

In the past, only baptized Christians were allowed to take part in the Liturgy of the Faithful (a/k/a the Liturgy of the Eucharist). This practice originated as a precautionary measure in times when the Church was being persecuted. It was meant to ensure that those participating in the Eucharist (the most sacred and awesome of all events in Christian worship) were committed to the faith; that no infiltrators, sent by those seeking to destroy Christianity, were admitted.

Notably, just before the reciting of the Nicene Creed, the priest exclaims, “The doors, the doors, in wisdom, let us be attentive”. It is at this point, centuries ago, that the doors of the church would literally be closed to “the Catechumens” and to all outsiders. When the Church was no longer being persecuted, the practice of requiring non-baptized individuals to leave the service before the celebration of the Eucharist fell into disuse.

#### The Liturgy of the Faithful:

This section of the Divine Liturgy brings us to the apex of the Service to God. We recite the central tenets of our faith, as codified in the Nicene Creed, and proceed with the Litany for the Faithful. The spiritual ascent then leads us to the Consecration of the bread and wine into the Precious Body and Blood of the Savior and ultimately to our Communion with Him in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

The Liturgy of the Faithful then ends with the final blessing, in which we acknowledge that Our Lord is “Good, and love[s] Mankind”.

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