

Liturgy: Theology Incarnate at the Parish Level

From the very beginnings the Christian community has formed around two foundational acts: “*they devoted themselves to **the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.***” (Acts 2:42, etc.). These two acts continue to be the foundation of Orthodox worship. The Orthodox Liturgy comprises of these two parts:

The Liturgy of the Word, and
The Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Liturgy is the continuation at the parish level of the fundamental acts upon which the church was founded! It is theology incarnate!!

Liturgy is part of a daily rhythm of prayer:

Vespers (Sunset) — Beginning of the liturgical day

Compline (After dinner) — Rest of body and mind at end of day

Midnight Office — Call to readiness for Lord's coming

Matins — Main liturgical & theological themes of the day

First Hour (Sunrise) — Greeting of the new day

Divine Liturgy — Corporate gathering for Eucharist

Third Hour (Mid-morning) — Remembrance of descent of Holy Spirit

Sixth Hour (Noon) — Remembrance of Lord's Passion & Crucifixion

Ninth Hour (Mid-Afternoon) — Remembrance of Lord's death on the Cross.

All of these services, except Liturgy, can be done in small groups or even in one's own home, privately.

Proskomide: Preparation of the Gifts

The preparation is done inside the sanctuary in a side altar (the Prothesis table) before Liturgy begins. In Greek parishes this is usually during Matins. The loaves of the Eucharistic bread (Prosfora) are brought to church by the person who baked them. Each loaf is marked with a seal which is the guide for cutting out the pieces that are placed on the paten.



While the pieces are arranged on the paten, words are recited that repeat the events of the crucifixion of Christ. The arrangement of the bread on the paten is a visual image of the Church as the community of saints and believers gathered around Christ.

Wine is poured into the chalice mixed with cold water.



When everything is prepared, the deacon (if present) says to the priest: *Καιρός τοῦ ποιῆσαι τῷ Κυρίῳ.* “It is time for the Lord to act.” But it can also be translated as, “It is time to render service to the Lord.”

Opening Doxology: “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.”

The Liturgy is the only service in the daily cycle of worship that begins this way. That says something about the goal and orientation of the Liturgy. Interesting that the only other services that begin with this doxology are the Baptism and Crowning (Marriage) services, both of which were originally part of the Divine Liturgy!

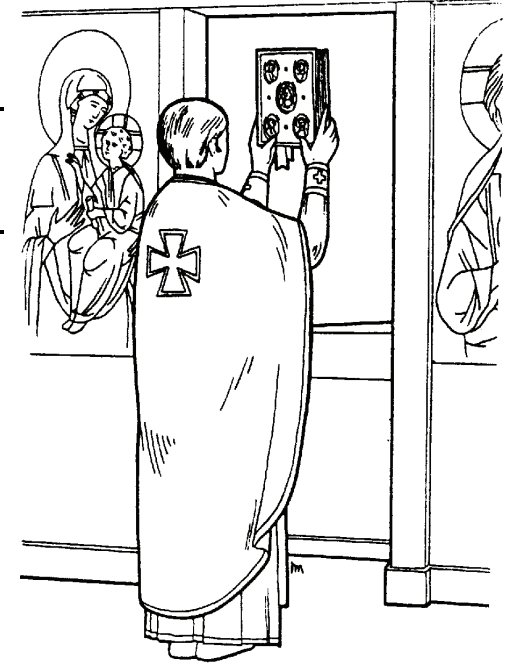
Great Litany: Prayers for the whole world and for everyone everywhere.

Antiphons: In the Greek parish usage, these consist of psalm verses chanted in alternation with sung refrains. Single voices commonly alternate with choral singing of refrains. Antiphonal singing in itself is an aural image of the church and our gathering in worship. We come with our own needs and voices, speaking different things to God, but we all blend into a harmony. The Russian practice preserves the more authentic tradition of using Psalms 103 & 146 for the first two Antiphons and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11) as the third Antiphon. Congregational singing of the Antiphons is a necessary step forward. Perhaps it will even make the arrival of latecomers less distracting? Even a manifestation of people coming together in harmony?



Small Entrance (with the Gospel): In early centuries, the actual beginning of the Liturgy was at this point; the Great Litany and Antiphons were probably added later. The Entrance Hymn was an actual entrance into the church building by everyone, not just a movement of priest and acolytes from one door to another in the Iconostasion!

“Blessed is the entrance of your saints.” The saints who are entering are God’s people, both in this world and in the world to come! “Wisdom, let us be attentive!” — a call to engage the mind. “Come let us worship and bow down....” In addition to the mind, Orthodox worship engages the body as well. Hymns of the day follow the entrance.

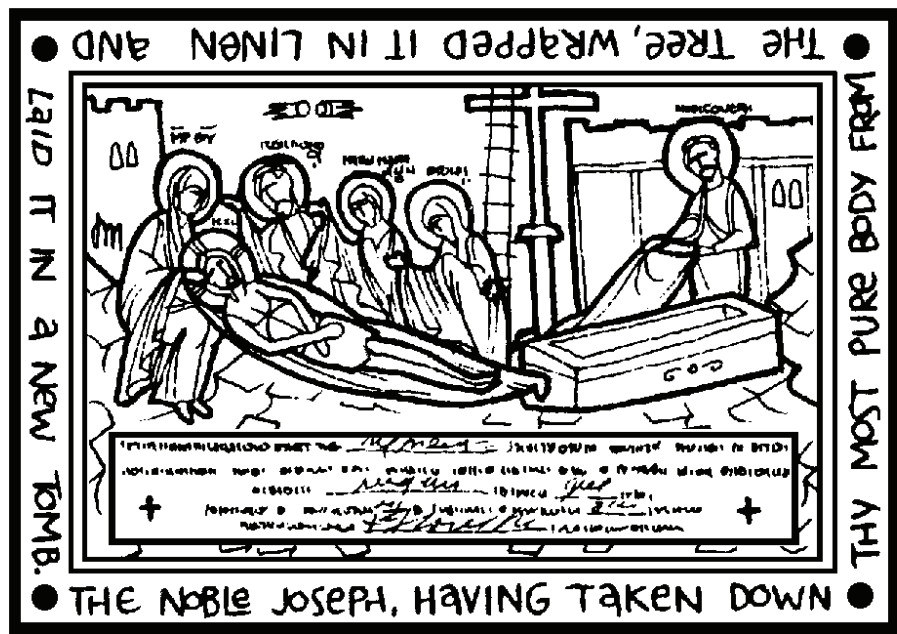
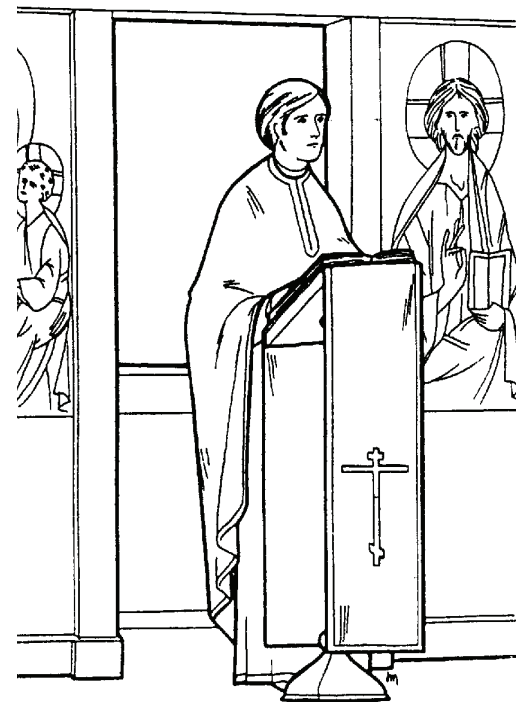


The Trisagion Hymn: “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.” The essential attribute of God is that God is holy. The angels sing of God’s holiness unceasingly (see Isaiah 6.1-3, Revelation 4.8). If we are “saints”, then we enter with God’s holy angels and we sing the holiest hymn of all. It is only because God is holy, mighty and immortal that we can ask him to have mercy on us. God’s holiness is most perfectly revealed in the holy humanity of Christ. Thus, in the middle of the Trisagion Hymn, the priest silently prays: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord...” Christ is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, but so is everyone who willingly chooses the path of purification and alertness to God’s voice. When we choose this path, we not only receive the grace to be “saints” (holy ones) but also to bless God in his holiness!

Epistle and Gospel Readings

Oikos of the Universal Exaltation of the Cross (Sept. 14): He who was caught up in the third heaven to Paradise, and who heard unspeakable and divine words which no human tongue can utter, wrote to the Galatians—as lovers of Scriptures (ως ερασταί τών Γραφών), you surely have read and know his words—saying... “The psalms and readings prepare and cleanse us for the great sanctification of the Holy Mysteries.” (*Nicholas Cabasilas, Commentary on the Liturgy*)

Public reading of Scriptures is not a minor thing! (1 Timothy 4.13)
Sermon follows the readings, as explication and response to the scriptures.



At the conclusion of the readings and sermon, the Gospel book is turned sideways and placed toward the back of the altar table. The **antimension** is opened in place of the Gospel book. This represents the Bishop’s approval of the local Eucharistic assembly. The bishop has always signified the unity of the church. Early Christian belief: where the bishop is, the church is; where the bishop is, Christ is (Saint Ignatius of Antioch (c. 100 AD). The bishop is the **episkopos**, overseer.

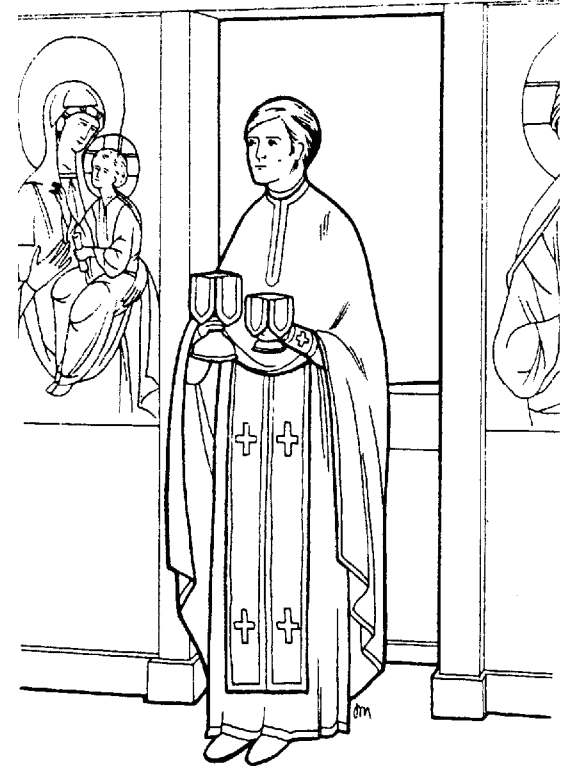
The Priest's Prayer is read silently after the antimimension is unfolded. But the real priest is Christ (see Epistle to the Hebrews). "For you, Christ our God, are the Offerer and the Offered, the One who receives and is distributed ..." As our great high priest, Christ stands between us and God. We offer everything through him (he is the Offerer) and yet the greatest gift that we can give to God is Christ himself (he is the Offered), for he is one of us and represents us. We give ourselves to God through Christ, in union with Christ. He receives our thanks and adoration and he distributes himself to all his people, as he comes to dwell within each of us through his word and as the Word.

While the priest reads this prayer, the choir leads in the singing of the **Cherubic Hymn**. What could it possibly mean that we "mystically represent the Cherubim"? The actual Greek verb is *eikonizontes*, from the noun *eikon*. An icon is an image in this world of something that exists in the timeless realm. The Cherubic Hymn tells us what we must do if our participation in the Eucharist is to be meaningful and fruitful: We must receive the King of all by setting aside all worldly cares. This is how we come into his presence and welcome him into our hearts where he may dwell richly.

The Censing: During the Cherubic Hymn, the priest censes the altar table, the icons on the iconostasion and all the people present. God's people are God's living saints and receive the same honor as the glorified saints; God's image is inscribed in us in flesh and blood. The censing is a third preparation for the Eucharist: First, the priest prays for himself to the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Second, the Cherubic Hymn invites us to lay aside all worldly cares. Thirdly, the censing reminds us that despite what the Cherubic Hymn might imply with the *eikon* verb, we are icons of God, not of the angels.

Great Entrance: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16) was the keynote of the first part of the Liturgy, culminating in the reading of Christ’s own words in the Gospel. But Christ is also the Word – the Word of God incarnate, the Word that comes not only to speak to us, but to dwell in us. The Small Entrance brought the Word speaking to us; the Great Entrance brings the Word to dwell in us. The chalice and paten with the gifts of wine and bread are carried around the church to symbolically embrace all who are present.

At the end of the Great Entrance, the priest places the gifts of bread and wine on the altar table, on top of the antimimension. He censes the gifts and continues the Liturgy with another Litany.



The Creed

“Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess.” The Creed is the spoken confession of our faith, but this spoken faith is meaningless if it’s not an expression of love. “*Let love be genuine,*” Paul wrote (*Romans 12.9*). The “kiss of peace” is exchanged — faded out of use over time; partly restored in modern times.

“The doors, the doors! In wisdom, let us attend.” In earlier centuries, the doors of the church were closed at this point. The Nicene Creed is recited by all who are present. This is the most formal summary of core beliefs that the Church ever formulated. Its focus is on the “three persons” of the Trinity.

The Anaphora

Reciting the Creed can become a mechanical, routine thing, despite the high theology it encapsulates. So it is no surprise that at the end of the Creed, the first words of the priest are: “Let us stand well. Let us stand in awe. Let us be attentive, that we may present the holy offering in peace.” What is the “holy offering”? It is not just the bread and wine. This entire part of the Liturgy is called the Anaphora, the Offering. The words and actions are all part of our offering to God the Father. At the heart of our offering are the remembrance of Christ and the offering of himself. Thus, the people respond, “A mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise.” Christ offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. We can’t add to that sacrifice, nor can we repeat it. The Liturgy is not a re-enactment of Christ’s sacrifice. The sacrifice we offer is a spiritual sacrifice of praise.

The dialogue which follows is one of the most ancient kernels of Christian ritual that still survives, and it’s interesting that this very dialogue is found in almost all forms of Christian liturgy to this day.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” “And with your spirit.”

“Let us lift up our hearts.” “We lift them up to the Lord.

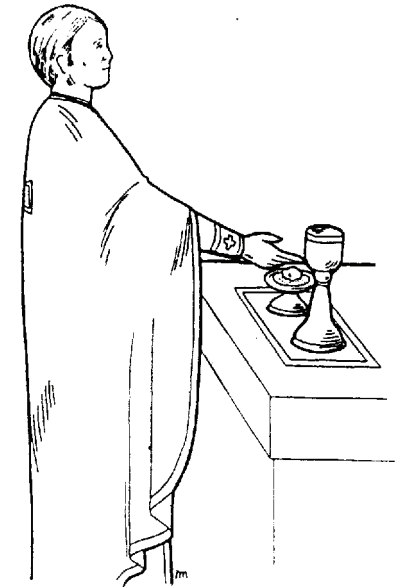
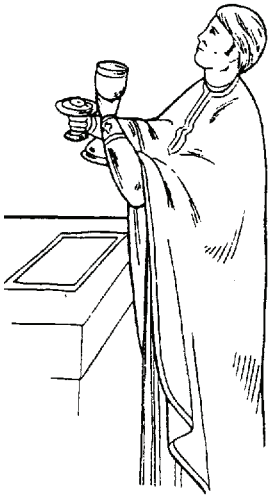
“Let us give thanks to the Lord.” “It is proper and right.” Everyone agrees.

The Prayer of the Anaphora that follows, expresses many of the things for which we thank God. The longer version of this prayer in the Liturgy of St. Basil is perhaps the most succinct summary of Orthodox theology to be found anywhere! In the middle of the prayer comes the “Holy, holy, holy” hymn (**Sanctus** in the West).

The Consecration of the Bread and Wine

At the end of the Anaphora we remember God's saving work through Jesus Christ. The culmination of that saving work, insofar as the Divine Liturgy is concerned, was the abiding gift of sanctification which was given to the world through the consecrated Bread and Wine – that, indeed, is the purpose for the existence of the Divine Liturgy! So, after remembering the words of Christ at the Last Supper, the chalice and paten are elevated, with the

words “Your own gifts from your own we offer to you in behalf of all and for all” (an echo of the words of the Priest's Prayer). Then we ask for the Holy Spirit to descend upon **us** and upon the **gifts** and make them the Body and Blood of Christ.



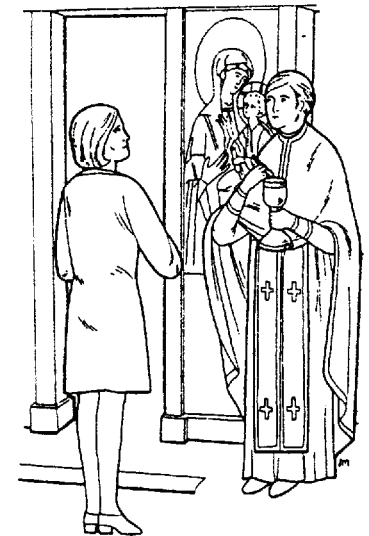
Everything in the Liturgy has been a preparation and movement to this high point. We announced our destination at the beginning of the Liturgy. We are now at that destination, the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is present (realized, fulfilled) when we join Jesus and his apostles and all the saints at his table through our “spiritual worship” (λογική λατρεία). The benefits of communion are enumerated: vigilance of soul, forgiveness of sins, communion of the Holy Spirit, realization of the Kingdom in our midst, confidence to face God without judgment of condemnation.

The remembrance of the saints follows as we rise from kneeling. Because, according to Hebrews 11:40, “*apart from us they should not be made perfect.*” The offering is not made for us and the world only, but also for Mary and all the saints! We are one with them.

Communion

“Having prayed for the unity of the faith and for the communion of the Holy Spirit,” we are exhorted to “commit ourselves, and one another,” to Christ the Lord. Only in this state and in this condition of spirit and heart can we then go on to pray the Lord’s Prayer “with confidence and without fear of condemnation.” The Lord’s Prayer is a wonderful expression of the Kingdom of God present or realized in our midst. After the Creed, this is the other great communal spoken affirmation. It is, in the final analysis, the only necessary prayer, and the only prayer commanded by Christ himself.

The culmination of our participation in Liturgy is the reception of Holy Communion. Whatever our explanation for the mystery of communion, in the end it is an act of union with Christ, and, through Christ, with God – the Holy Spirit being the agent of transformation (of the Bread and Wine and ourselves) that brings the union to pass. Holy Communion is the immediate experience of everything which the Lord’s Prayer promises: holiness, presence of the kingdom, God’s will on earth, daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil. If we consider carefully the separate parts of the Lord’s Prayer we will have a complete picture of what benefits we receive from Holy Communion. Awareness of this simple fact is perhaps the most important step toward experiencing the presence and indwelling of the Trinity in the act of Communion! Prayers of preparation are read privately before receiving communion. The main message of these prayers is that only God makes us worthy and ready for the *mysterion* of communion.



The only proper response to the gift of communion: “Let our mouths be filled with your praise, O Lord, that we may sing of your glory; for you have made us worthy to partake of your holy, divine, immortal and life-creating mysteries. Keep us in your holiness, that all the day we may meditate upon your righteousness. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!” It is absolutely shocking that this most beautiful hymn has dropped out of use in Greek churches!



The Dismissal

“Let us depart in peace.” “In the name of the Lord.”

It is in the name of the Lord that we depart, filled with the peace of Christ to be bringers of peace to the world.

“Lord, bless those who praise you and sanctify those who trust in you... For every good and perfect gift is from above, coming from you, the Father of lights...” This beautiful prayer is followed by the hymn, “Blessed is the name of the Lord, from now and to the ages.” So God blesses us and we bless God!

“May the blessing and mercy of the Lord come upon you, through his divine grace and love always...” and we’re done.

The Antidoron is distributed at end of Liturgy. The word means “instead of the gift,” as if anything could be in the stead of the gift! But this is just another example of how decadent the Greek practice of communion has become in recent centuries. But change is happening! Or, more accurately, we are re-discovering the more genuine tradition.