

The Holies for the Holy
by Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky

The Divine Liturgy

The Divine Liturgy takes the central place in the prayer-service of the day. Indeed it is not only a prayer service, but it is the greatest of the Mysteries (sacraments) of the Church, the mystery of the offering of the bloodless Sacrifice and the communing of the faithful in the Body and Blood of Christ.

After the prayerful struggles of the whole day, after these prayerful labors, there is laid before the believers the sacred mystical Table [In previous chapters, Fr Michael has described the whole cycle of the daily church services, and obviously sees the Liturgy as the crown of these, rather than as the one service that we bother to attend, which has sadly become the practice of many Orthodox Christians today]. She is manifestly the completion of all the supplications, the invitation to the Lord's Table. And actually where the Divine services are served throughout the day in accordance with the typicon [the ecclesiastical rule], the Divine Liturgy is accepted in just the same way as in the circle of their family supper is welcomed, even when there is nothing for it agreeable or rich, by those who have been working after their labors. How much then do those people lose, and all the more those parish communities, for which all the divine services, even the Sunday ones, consist solely of a Liturgy! It is not to be wondered at, when for these same people mere attendance at the Liturgy seems in their eyes to be a duty and a labour....

For the greater part of the year the order of the Liturgy, as it is served daily in the Orthodox Church, follows that of St John Chrysostom. Ten times a year the Liturgy of St Basil the Great is celebrated. These ten days are as follows: the five Sundays in Great Lent, the Great [Maundy] Thursday and the Great Saturday of Passion Week, the eve of the Nativity of Christ and the eve of Theophany, and the day of the commemoration of St Basil the Great, 1st January. In Great Lent, on Wednesdays and Fridays, on the Thursday of the fifth week of the Great Fast and on the first three days of Passion Week, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is celebrated.

The first two orders [St John's and St Basil's] have an identical structure. The difference between them consists solely in the broader compass, in St Basil the Great's Liturgy, of the Eucharistic prayer which effects the mystery.

There exist innumerable expositions of the Liturgy, some from the holy Fathers and others from simple, pious Orthodox Christians. As an example of the latter, we have the "Meditations on the Divine Liturgy" by the Russian writer, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol (1809-1852). In these expositions those who so wish can gain a more detailed and deeper understanding of every moment of the sacred rites. In the present survey of the Orthodox divine services, it is only possible briefly to explain the course of the Liturgy and to mention the significance of its most important parts.

The word, "Liturgy," means "common / general service." Following the Mystical Supper itself, which was celebrated by the Lord Jesus Christ with the disciples on the night in which He was betrayed, it is a sacramental act of the closest union with Christ for those who believe in Him, an expression of the unity between the body of the Church and her Head. The other services can be served privately, or even in private accommodation, and without any connection to other prayer services; the other services can even be read or chanted if the necessity arises without a priest, according to the special order which the typicon provides for such an occasion. The Liturgy can only be celebrated by a canonically ordained Bishop or Presbyter on a consecrated Holy Table in church, or, in exceptional cases, elsewhere on the specially consecrated antimimension, or liturgical cloth. It also requires a special preparation in prayer.

Three parts follow each other in the Liturgy: a) the proskomidi [prothesis], b) the Liturgy of the Catechumens and c) the Liturgy of the Faithful.

The proskomidi is the liturgical "preparation" celebrated by the priest. It takes part without the participation of the faithful; their participation is expressed only by their offering the bread for the proskomidi, the prosphora. The proskomidi consists in the preparation of the Holy Lamb on the diskos [paten] and the wine in the Cup for their impending change of the elements. Around the bread, the Holy Lamb, other, smaller particles are placed in honor of the Mother of God and to commemorate all the assemblies of the saints, and for the propitiatory remembrance of living Orthodox Christians and of the departed,—"those that have offered it, and those for whom they have offered it" [From the Prayer of the Prothesis]. These particles are tipped into the Cup after the communion of the faithful, at the end of the Liturgy.

The second part of the Liturgy is that for all the people, for the believing Orthodox Christians.

"Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages"-the Priest exclaims. This exclamation raises our hearts and minds to the Kingdom of the Most Holy Trinity, telling us that the Liturgy is the mystery of the closest union with God, the mystery of the propitiation of the Heavenly Father by His Son for the sins of people, the witness of the love of the Heavenly Father towards the race of mankind, the mystery of the Holy Spirit, Who changes the gifts that are offered into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Immediately after this exclamation, with the adjoined Great Supplication, or Litany of Peace, the Church prays for the peace of the world, for the Church and all the faithful. Immediately after there come a further two psalms, and we hear in the chants as it were a gathering together into one of the liturgies of the earthly and of the heavenly Church. At first in the psalms, "Bless the Lord, O my soul" (Ps. 102), and "Praise the Lord, O my soul" (Ps. 145), we hear a call to the earthly members of the Church to glorify God, and after them, there is chanted a short, but complete, confession of the faith in the Son of God; this is the chanting of "O Only-Begotten Son." Therein there are contained all the chief dogmas concerning the Person of Jesus Christ, namely that:

- a) He is the Only-Begotten Son of God, and

- b) the Word of God,
- c) He is Eternal, immortal,
- d) that He willed for the sake of our salvation to become man,
- e) that His Mother Mary is the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin,
- f) that He was united to man unalterably, for ever,
- g) that He was crucified, though He was God,
- h) that by death He trampled down death,
- i) that he is One of the Holy Trinity,
- j) that He is glorified equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit; and the hymn ends with the evangelical cry, "save us."

Then we sing the praises of the blessed holy ones from the Gospels: "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are they that mourn... Blessed are the meek... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in the Heavens." According to the typicon, between the verses of the beatitudes, there are hymns from the canon of the saints of the given day or from the canon of the feast, and a little later the troparions and kontakions of the day. In this way, the Saints are called upon to Join in the glorification with us. And the priest, coming out at this time for the Little Entrance, even calls upon the Angels to join in this common glorification, when he secretly pronounces the prayer, "O Master, Lord our God ... ordain that with our entrance there may be an entrance of holy Angels ministering together with us, and with us glorifying Thy goodness." Thus the earthly, the Saints and the Angels are made ready and united for the meeting of the Lord, Who comes for His earthly ministry. This manifestation of the Lord is signified by the entrance with the Gospel Book, which we call the Little Entrance. The believers reverently look upon the Gospel as if upon the coming of the Lord Himself, and they joyously meet Him and cry out: "Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ." The entrance into the sanctuary through the Royal Gates should be experienced by the sacred ministers as if it were the entrance into a higher world, into the Kingdom of the glory of the Holy Trinity. The rest of the course of the Liturgy is indeed a glorifying of the Trinity. It starts with the solemn chanting of the "Thrice-Holy Hymn." The importance of this moment is made clear from the priest's prayer: "O God, Who art holy, Who restest in the holies, Who with thrice-holy voice art hymned by the seraphim, and glorified by the cherubim, and worshipped by all the heavenly host; ... do Thou Thyself, O Master, accept the Thrice-holy Hymn from the mouths of us sinners also."

Then we hear a call to greater attention: "Wisdom! Let us attend!" The reader intones the prokeimenon appointed for the day: this is verses from the Old Testament Scripture, which are invested by us with a higher, New Testament meaning. In the center of the church the reader reads the Apostle [a lection from the Acts of the Apostles or the Epistles]. After the threefold chanting of the Alleluia (praise ye God!) the celebrant invites us to listen to the holy Gospel. We hear the very words of the Lord Himself, as if we were present when He spoke with the disciples and with the people. Following the reading of the Gospel, then come the Litany of Fervent Supplication with its threefold "Lord, have mercy," and the Litany for the Catechumens, that is for those preparing for Baptism, which brings to an end the second part of the Liturgy. From here on we transfer to the most important part, the Liturgy of the Faithful.

Only the actual members of the Church are permitted to attend the Liturgy of the Faithful. For this reason, the catechumens, those who are not yet baptized, leave the church after the prayer said for them. Once and again the deacon pronounces the supplicatory litany, to which the people respond with the chanting of "Lord, have mercy;" this gives the priest the opportunity to prepare in prayer for the rest of the sacramental service with the special prayers.

During the chanting of "Let us who mystically portray the Cherubim," the Great Entrance is made, with the gifts prepared for the Eucharist. It consists in the transferal of the gifts from the Table of Oblation [prothesis] to the Holy Table or "Throne" through the Royal Gates. The serving with the Angels, which distinguished the Little Entrance, is apparent again with even greater majesty. The transfer of the gifts lifts up our minds to the coming of the Lord of hosts Himself, at this moment those standing in the church are called upon to fulfill an angelic ministry. This is described in the Cherubim Hymn: "Let us who mystically portray the Cherubim, and chant the thrice-holy hymn unto the life-creating Trinity, lay aside all earthly care, that we may receive the King of all, escorted invisibly by the angelic orders. Alleluia." [The Russian has a note reminding us that the original Greek word for escorted means borne on spears-this refers to an ancient custom of bearing the Emperor or a triumphant hero on a shield which was held aloft on spear points-transl.] The transfer of the gifts, which have been prepared for sanctification, represents the laying of the Saviour in the tomb. At this point we must concentrate upon those sacred remembrances of the things lived through on Great Friday and on the Great Sabbath of Passion Week, so that, later, at the end of the Liturgy we might rejoice in the Resurrection and the Ascension of the Lord. Now, as he bears the paten and cup in and places them upon the Holy Table, the celebrant prays using the hymns from those great days of Passion Week: "The noble Joseph, taking Thine immaculate Body down from the Tree, and having wrapped It in pure linen and spices, laid It for burial in a new tomb," "In the grave bodily; in hades with Thy soul, though Thou wast God; in Paradise with the thief; and on the Throne with the Father and the Spirit was Thou Who fillest all things, O Christ the Uncircumscribable," "How life-giving, how much more beautiful than Paradise, and truly more resplendent than any royal palace proved Thy grave, the source of our resurrection, O Christ."

The Royal Gates and the veil behind them are closed after the Great Entrance, so that nothing should disturb the concentrated prayer which prepares us for the most important moment of the Eucharist. We must pay especial attention to the fact that the Church prepares us all for further participation in the sacred mystery. She prepares us, first of all by the prayer petitions concerning the offering of the precious gifts and for us, ourselves; and secondly She prepares us by inspiring us with peace and with mutual love, employing in this those two exclamations which have but one meaning: "Peace be unto all," and "Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in essence and undivided." During these, the priests kiss the veiled holy gifts and each other, greeting each other with the words: "Christ is in our midst!" "He is and shall be!" And thirdly, the Church prepares us for the mystery with the confession of the Faith in the chanting of the Symbol of Faith [the Creed]. From ancient

times, it was laid down by the Church that all the faithful should know the Symbol of Faith by heart, it being a saving mark of faith, which one must always have with one. Before the Symbol of the Faith, there is an announcement to the people: "The doors. The doors. In wisdom let us attend." Let us guard the doors of the church against everything that is disorderly; on account of the wisdom of God's mystery, let us, who are attending the Eucharist or are offering the bloodless Sacrifice, also guard the doors of our soul against every thought which is alien to the sacredness of the moment.

There is yet another call to heartfelt and reverent attention: "Let us stand well. Let us stand with fear. Let us attend that we may offer the holy oblation in peace." The faithful, being united, concentrated, cleansed by their prayerful sighings, receive a blessing in the name of the Holy Trinity in the words of the Apostle Paul: "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." "Let us lift up our hearts."

It is after preparing us in such a way for the unfathomable sacred rite of the universal, mystical and bloodless sacrifice, that the Church, finally, celebrates the mystery of the offering of the Sacrifice. If the church has a peal of bells, the Church announces the impending sacred rite with the ringing of the bell, so that those of the faithful who are not at church can at that moment thank the Lord. This ringing is called "On the It is Meet." The priest prays the prolonged eucharistic (this literally means thanksgiving) prayer during the chanting of "Meet and right it is to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in essence and undivided," "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of Thy glory. Hosanna in the highest: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest," "We hymn Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks to Thee, O Lord, and we entreat Thee, O our God," and he pauses in this secret prayer to intone the appointed exclamations in a loud voice. During the singing of "We hymn Thee," the blessing of the Holy Gifts takes place: the Holy Gifts are changed in essence into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharist is an offering to God the Father, and therefore the supplications in that part of the Liturgy, which falls between the Great Entrance and the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, are addressed to God the Father. In this concentrated prayer, thanksgiving and praise are offered and we express noetic contemplation of God's glory, we bring to mind the creation of the world, the coming of the Son of God, His earthly life, the Mystical Supper, the death upon the Cross, and the Resurrection, and we raise up a prayer that the Holy Spirit might be sent down upon the Gifts that have been set forth.

Immediately after the blessing of the Holy Gifts, there comes a thanksgiving commemoration of the whole heavenly and earthly Church, "especially" (that means beyond all compare) the All-immaculate Theotokos, and then the assemblies of the Saints, and then there is a commemoration for the well-being and salvation of all those close to us, and for the repose of those who have fallen asleep.

The Sacrifice has been offered. The Church again offers up doxology to the Most Holy Trinity: "And grant us with one mouth and one heart to glorify and hymn Thine all-honorable and majestic name, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," and

She calls upon all who are praying the mercies of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Experiencing a feeling of the special closeness of God to us, after the petitionary litany with its response, "Grant this, O Lord," we joyfully express before God our consciousness of our being adopted by grace as the sons of Him, Who is our Heavenly Father: "And vouchsafe, O Master, that with boldness and without condemnation we may dare to call upon Thee, the Heavenly God, as Father" ... and we chant "Our Father."

There follows a secret prayer of thanksgiving by the priest, and then the exclamation: "Let us attend. The Holies for the holy;"-in other words the Holy Gifts are for those who are worthy of them. This exclamation is proclaimed at the approach of the time of the communion of the Holy Gifts. The people, though the lips of the choir, answer: "One is holy, One is Lord, Jesus Christ;" the significance of these words is that we do not dare to call ourselves worthy or holy. The veil is closed across the Royal Gates, and then the communion of the clergy within the sanctuary takes place, as does the preparation of the Cup for the communion of the lay people.

Just as at the Resurrection of Christ, the stone was rolled away from the door of the Lord's tomb, and the Lord appeared to the Ointment-bearing Women and to His disciples, so, making ready for the communion of the lay people, the veil is pulled back and the Royal Gates opened, and the Risen Christ, our Pascha, is revealed to the people. The Church invites us to joyously receive Christ within ourselves with the words: "With fear of God, with faith [and love] draw nigh." Those present, meeting with their gaze the One Who is Risen, cry out: "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. God is the Lord and hath appeared unto us." And in the sanctuary, at the completion of the communion, they pronounce the paschal hymns: "Let us who have beheld the Resurrection of Christ," "Shine, shine, O new Jerusalem," "O great and most sacred Pascha, Christ; O wisdom and Word and Power of God! Grant that we partake of Thee fully in the unwaning day of Thy Kingdom."

The communion of the lay people is thus: the Church calls all the faithful to the communion of the Holy Mysteries. She expects us to participate at the Divine Table on numerous occasions. For our own good, we must respond to her call. But it is necessary that we take care that our communing might be as worthy as is possible. For this, we must prepare spiritually, by repentance, by being at peace with all, by strengthening ourselves in faith and in the fear of God, preparing by prayerful participation in the divine services of that day, and whenever possible, of the previous day, by the reading of the appointed canons before Communion, to the Saviour, the Mother of God and the Guardian Angel, and most especially by the heartfelt reading of the Canon before Communion and the prayers attached to it.

It was not for a long time that the Risen Lord was seen to converse with the Church. On the fortieth day after His Resurrection, He appeared to His disciples for the last time, blessed them and they "worshipped Him." And now the Church, directing the flock of

Christ, calls upon it the blessing of God with the words: "Save, O God, Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance." And the faithful respond with a feeling of gratitude that they have accepted with all their soul the benefactions of the Holy Trinity: "We have seen the true Light. We have received the Heavenly Spirit. We have found the true Faith, in worshipping the indivisible Trinity; for He hath saved us." The Church strengthens us with the Lord's promise to be with us "always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages." Then, [as the deacon] "looks upon us," the Holy Gifts are removed from the Holy Table to the Table of Oblation after the priest says: "Be Thou exalted above the heavens, O God, and Thy glory above all the earth." And thus they are hidden from our eyes. The Church lay upon us that we should chant a thanksgiving for the communion of the Holy Mysteries: "Fill my mouth with Thy praise, O Lord."

For the sanctification of partaking of Communion, for being united to, and being filled with the highest joy in, the Lord, we pronounce a thanksgiving litany, and the Church blesses us to leave the church with the exclamation, "In peace let us depart," and with the Prayer behind the Ambon [the long prayer at the end of the Liturgy said by the priest when he comes out of the sanctuary, and stands below the steps of the ambon in the centre of the church-transl]. After the thrice repeated "Blessed be the name of the Lord," at a festal Liturgy there is usually a homily [this is a Russian practice, in many churches the homily or sermon follows straight after the Gospel, so that it remains within the teaching part of the Liturgy-transl.] But if there is no homily, as is often the case on weekdays, those who have been praying do not leave without a parting exhortation. In this exhortation, the Church teaches us how to conduct ourselves at all times as Christians in our relationship with God and with our close ones; the exhortation is the recitation of Psalm 33, "I will bless the Lord at all times" [sadly often omitted in present practice, or said during the communion of the clergy transl.] He who has celebrated the Liturgy blesses the people with the words, "The blessing of the Lord, and His mercy come upon us," and he pronounces the dismissal of the Liturgy. The thanksgiving prayers after Communion are then read, which all we who have received Communion should listen to with attention and gratitude.

Thus the Lord's Supper is celebrated, handed down by Him to His disciples and through them to the Church of Christ in all ages. Every moment of the Liturgy, especially its most important part after the Cherubic Hymn, is in accordance with the celebration of the Liturgy in the ancient Christian Church, as those written records that have come down to us testify.

Extracted from *Prayer in the World*, by Fr. Michael Pomazansky. This was reprinted from *The Shepherd*, Vol. XIX, No. 12 (August, 1999). Unfortunately this fine book is out of print.

Source: http://www.stmaryofegypt.org/devotion/on_divine_liturgy.htm