

Welcome To The Orthodox Liturgy

When the envoys of Prince Vladimir arrived in Constantinople to inquire about the Christian faith, they were not offered a verbal explanation. Rather, they were taken to the Church of the Holy Wisdom to witness the celebration of the liturgy. It was the action of the Liturgy that converted them.

Professor Ion Bria writes, "It has rightly been said that the best way of access to the heart of the Orthodox Church is the 'divine liturgy,' the celebration of the holy mysteries (Eucharist). If people would like to know what Orthodox Christians believe in, whom they worship, and how they live, they should penetrate the form and substance of the liturgy." For Orthodox Christians the liturgy is the central medium for comprehending the Gospel.

St. Nicholas Cabasilas calls the liturgy the final and greatest of the mysteries, "since it is not possible to go beyond it or add anything to it. After the liturgy there is nowhere to go. There all must stand, and try to examine the means by which we may preserve the treasure to the end. For in it we obtain God Himself, and God is united with us in the most perfect union" (The Life of Christ 4. 1,3).

What is The Liturgy?

Let us consider what the liturgy is.

Fr. Schmemmann said, "The liturgy is, first of all, the Paschal gathering of those who are to meet the Risen Lord and enter with Him into His kingdom."

Nicholas Gogol wrote, "The liturgy is the eternal repetition of the great act of love for us."

The central event of the liturgy is the descent, the appearance, and the divine presence of the resurrected Christ. A person is frequently reminded of this presence. For example, at one point in the liturgy the priest, says, "Christ is in our midst." The cocelebrant priest responds, after exchanging the kiss of peace, "He is and will ever be."

The Eucharist is the Biblical wedding supper at which the celestial Bridegroom – Jesus – weds the pure bride, the chosen congregation, you and me. It is the consummation of the love relationship between God and man. The liturgy is the place where one can "lay aside

all worldly care," as the Cherubic Hymn invites us, "to receive the King of all."

The liturgy is where the saving deeds of Christ are made present to us today so that we may participate in them. Christ becomes our contemporary; Christ Who is "the same yesterday, today and forever."

In the Orthodox Church the doctrine of the atonement is a liturgical doctrine. What our Savior did for us on Calvary and at the tomb is not left in the distant past. It is made present again in the Liturgy (Eucharist) and the Sacraments.

In the first part of the liturgy, the liturgy of the word, Christ comes to us as the LOGOS, the Word of God. In the second part of the liturgy, the liturgy of the faithful, He comes to us as the LAMB OF GOD Who takes away the sins of the world. He comes to us in every liturgy as both the Word and Lamb of God, speaking to us and uniting Himself with us. In the first part of the liturgy He offers us the word of God. In the second part He offers us the power we need to live the word of God.

The liturgy is Pentecost as well as Easter. The epiclesis prayer is an invocation to the Holy Spirit that He come upon us first, and then upon: the gifts of bread and wine to change them into the Body and Blood of our Savior. Listen to the words of the epiclesis:

"We offer unto Thee this spiritual and bloodless service; and we pray, we beseech and implore Thee: Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here set forth."

The liturgy is more even than Easter and Pentecost. It is a calling to remembrance and making present again of all the sacred events in the history of our salvation. As the prayer of the liturgy says:

"Remembering therefore... all those things which came to pass for our sakes; the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting on the right hand, the coming again a second time in glory."

In the liturgy, by sharing the Body and Blood of Jesus, we become partakers of divine nature (Peter 1:4) and experience a foretaste of the kingdom, which was inaugurated at the incarnation in Bethlehem and manifested at Pentecost in the Upper Room.

The Little Entrance Not Symbolic

Many believe that the little entrance of the liturgy when the priest carries the Gospel book in procession out to the people is a beautiful symbolic ceremony. It symbolizes the beginning of Christ's preaching ministry at age thirty. But this procession is anything but symbolic. It is real. Christ actually comes today to address us personally with His words of everlasting life. It is a real personal encounter with the Lord of life. To listen to His words as spoken through the Gospel lesson is to gain life; to fail to listen is to choose death.

Thus, as the multitudes went to hear Jesus on the Mount of Beatitudes; as they flocked to Him to be fed the five loaves and two fish; as the dying thief on the cross implored Him for mercy, and as the disciples sat with Him at the Last Supper, so we may approach Jesus today through the liturgy.



The
Divine
Liturgy

Doxology

The dominant theme of our Orthodox Christian faith is doxology and praise. Most often the liturgy in the Orthodox Church is preceded by the singing of the great Doxology which sets the tone for the entire liturgy which is one of complete *efcharistia*: gratitude and praise. "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit..." "Blessed be the kingdom of God the Father... Son... and Holy Spirit." This is the major theme of Orthodox worship as it was the dominant motif of the early Christians. What do we find in the New Testament? Tribulation, demons, suffering, crucifixion – yet always with a doxology because Christ has taken the worst of man and overcome it. "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer I have overcome the world," said Jesus. Not crucifixion but resurrection has the last word! Not death but life! Is it any wonder that thanksgiving and praise and doxology are not only the dominant theme but also the whole life style of the Christian?

The liturgy never ceases to glorify and thank God for all He has done and is doing for our salvation as we see in this beautiful prayer of the liturgy: "Thou didst bring us from non-being into being; and didst raise us up that were fallen away; and left nothing undone till Thou hadst lifted us to heaven, and hadst bestowed upon us the kingdom to come. For all these things we give thanks unto Thee... for all whereof we know and whereof we know not; for benefits both manifest and hid which Thou hadst wrought upon us..."

A Remembrance

The liturgy is a remembrance. We remember again a real historical event that has great meaning for us: the life of Jesus. We do this in obedience to Jesus Who said, "Do this in remembrance of Me," St. Paul wrote, "As often as you shall drink this cup and eat this bread you shall show forth the death of Jesus till He comes again."

Making Present Again

But the liturgy is not just a remembrance. It is also a *making present again* today of the life of Jesus so that

we are there just as the disciples were there when these great things happened.

The liturgy bridges the gap between what Jesus did two thousand years ago and us today. It is like the old TV program YOU ARE THERE which enacted great historical happenings and made us feel that we were actually there when they were happening. The sacrifice on Calvary, for example, is not repeated since the Lamb of God was sacrificed "once only, for all time," It is *made present again* mystically in the liturgy through the Holy Spirit so that *we are there* today:

- 1. WE ARE THERE** when Jesus teaches even as His disciples were there. We sit at His feet on the Mount of Beatitudes and He speaks as He spoke then. What is the Epistle, the Gospel reading, and the sermon but Jesus speaking to us today? We are there!
- 2. WE ARE THERE** as Jesus goes forth to die for us and we repeat the prayer of the dying thief, "Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom." This happens in the Great Entrance when the priest carries the covered chalice and paten out to the people and prays, "Remember, O Lord, each one of us when You come into Your kingdom." We are at Calvary at this moment. The same Jesus is present. Only this time we are the dying thief who asks to be remembered. And we pray his prayer. With the ears of faith we hear the same response from Jesus, "Today you will be with me in paradise."
- 3. WE ARE THERE** at the Last Supper and Jesus directs His invitation personally to each one of us: "Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you for the forgiveness of sins," and "Drink ye all of it. This is my blood..." He is the Host. We are the guests. Through the liturgy the Last Supper is not a banquet that took place 2,000 years ago for twelve special people. It is your banquet and my banquet today. We are all invited. The same Jesus is there. We are them. He gives us the same Bread of Life He gave His disciples. Paul Evdokimov writes, "All the holy suppers of the Church are nothing else than one eternal and unique Supper, that of Christ in the upper room. The same Divine act both takes place

at a specific moment in history, and is offered always in the sacrament."

- 4. WE ARE THERE** as Jesus ascends into heaven and we ascend with Him. When the priest carries our gifts into the altar at the Great Entrance and places them on the holy table, we are carried into the very presence of God. Every liturgy is an ascension into the presence of God. Jesus takes us there. This is why we sing the very same hymn the angels sing in His presence, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth..."
- 5. WE ARE THERE** as Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to His apostles on Pentecost. When we kneel during the liturgy for the epiclesis prayer, we experience Pentecost. We pray with the priest that God may send the Holy Spirit upon us and upon our gifts of bread and wine to change them into the Body and Blood of Jesus. This is a real Pentecost and we are there! We receive the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit and we leave filled with God's wisdom, life, power and presence.

So it is that in every liturgy the life, the teaching, the suffering, the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and Pentecost are not just remembered but also made present again so that we are there to actually participate in them!

The Procession Back To The World

The final movement of the liturgy can best be described as a RETURN, our return from heaven to earth, from the Kingdom of God back to our kitchen, or school, or home. But as we return we are different from what we were when we began the movement toward God at the beginning of the liturgy. We are not the same. For, "We have seen the True Light. We have received the Heavenly Spirit We have found the true faith" We come to the liturgy wounded, and we leave healed. We come hopeless, and we leave with hope. We come weak, and we leave strong. We come as sinners, and we leave as saints. We come in darkness, and we leave in light. We come hungry, and we leave filled with the Bread of Life. We come in sadness, and we leave in joy. Now Christ sends us back as witnesses of what we have seen and heard, to proclaim the good news of His Kingdom, and to.

continue His work. We are His people. He is in us and we are in Him. We return to the world as "other Christs" to transform and change it for Him. The true liturgy begins when we return to the world to work for Christ, to make real His love through our acts of mercy.

A Personal Testimony

Following is the personal testimony of a Presbyterian mother who visited the Soviet Union in 1984:

"For Russian Orthodox Christians, the Divine Liturgy is a meeting place between heaven and earth; an area of life in which men and women commune with God. It is celebrated with a fervor that is uninhibited, yet not hysterical. The image of God is powerfully communicated by a synthesis of poetry, paintings, drama and music. It totally encompasses all 5 senses. Imagine, if you will, standing body to body with hundreds of people, immobilized for 2-3 hours. Smell the sweet incense surrounding you as the image of God. Hear the crackling tapers tended by babushka. There are birds chirping outside and sunbeams streaming through the onion dome. Feel the intense gaze of the icons sharing in the worship with you. How melodious Russian congregations sing without any musical accompaniment. Massed soprano voices, pure without training. You are hearing the angels sing! Imagine whispering in English the Creed, Gloria and Lord's Prayer while the congregation chants them in the Old Church Slavonic I cried everytime.

"Soviet society can offer no comparable calm or beauty to the Orthodox liturgy. I suggest the same is true for our society. Peace is invoked, requested and exchanged several times during the Divine Liturgy. Peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of that Divine Person whose very being is order, harmony, joy, life, creation; and whose absence is emptiness, nothingness and chaos. This is made present in sight, sound, touch, taste, word and action each time the liturgy is celebrated. Through this, Orthodox Christians discover and receive the peace of God which passes all human understanding."