

The Liturgy of the Word  
ReCatechism 3  
Tim Prattas

The session entitled “**Blessed is the Kingdom: The Liturgy of the Word**”, is referring to the “beginning” of the Divine Liturgy as we identify it today. In this session, the first part of the Divine Liturgy will be discussed –from the beginning (or the “Εναρξίς”) to the end of the Prayers for the Catechumens. The title itself comes from a prayer that is said as Matins finishes, with the Priest raising the Book of the Gospels over the Altar Table in a cross-ward motion. Yet, in retrospect, tonight’s session probably should have been called, “**It’s Time: The Lord is Ready to Act**” (in Greek, “**καιρός του ποιήσαι τω Κυρίω**”). It’s an acronym to learn the first part of the Liturgy: *it’s all about TIME*:

**Two Centuries of History**  
**Individuals and Community**  
**Map of the Service**  
**Encounter with Christ through our neighbour**

*So... let’s begin.*

**Two Centuries of History**

Many people think our liturgy is the same since the time of the Apostles, as if the rite itself was authored by Jesus Christ. Yet, every one of us should note that the Liturgy – in the way it is celebrated today – is **not** how it was celebrated in the early centuries of Christianity. Many changes have taken place: from the chants to the Scripture readings, the structure and length to the overall meaning and theme.

Fr. Pavlos Koumarianos, one of our former priests in this Metropolis and an expert in liturgical theology, identified,

... two periods in liturgical theology as regards the understanding of symbolism and reality in the Liturgy. The first period goes up to the iconoclast controversy ... [and] the second period is from iconoclasm to the present day.... Up to the time of iconoclasm, what is important in the Liturgy is what the faithful (clergy and laity) are all doing together.... It is an act of Communion of the Faithful, with each other and with God; a communion which is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

In the second period, however, there develops a form of allegory or symbolism which basically has to do with what the priest does. In this period, what matters is not what the faithful and clergy do together as a whole, but what the priest does in front of the faithful, and every one of the priest’s actions “symbolises” something. In other words, the Liturgy is understood as a kind of drama, in which the faithful watch a representation of the life of Christ performed by the clergy.

Now, tonight's presentation is not to piece together the history of the liturgy; however, a basic historical backdrop is necessary to understand the development of the liturgy, and to appreciate it fully today.

Today, the Orthodox Church celebrates three Divine Liturgies. The first is that of St. John Chrysostom, celebrated on almost every Sunday and great feast. The second is that of St. Basil the Great, celebrated 10 times a year. The third, which is only celebrated twice a year (on his feastdays), is that of St. James the Brother of the Lord (his feast days are on October 23<sup>rd</sup> and the Sunday after Christmas).

The first part of the Liturgy is known as the "**Liturgy of the Word**" (as the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is declared before us throughout the Scriptural readings and the sermon [the apex of this part of the service]). It is also known as the "**Liturgy of the Catechumens**" (as the Catechumens were present for this part of the Liturgy).

### **Individuals and Community**

When discussing faith and worship, many of us that work in the Church hear the famous line, "*I will worship my own way and I can pray at home.*" Although this idea is very much accepted in a post-modern society, the Orthodox Church always teaches its believers that both *private prayer* (at home, at work, etc.) and – more importantly – *communal prayer* is important, since "no one goes to Heaven by themselves". **Individuals united together form the Community of Faith.** From its outset, the Liturgy seeks to promote that unity.

The individuals involved in the Divine Liturgy can be separated into two categories: *clergy* and *laity*. The **clergy** are separated into the high-order and low-order clergy. The high-order clergy include: the bishop, the priest and the deacon. From the first century, the **Bishop** is the head of the local Eucharistic Community, the one who presides over – or "celebrates" – the Divine Liturgy. Just as Christ is the Central Figure of the Last Supper, the bishop is the one who takes the place of Christ at the "Lord's Table" or "Altar". If the bishop is not present, the **Priest** (or "Presbyter") takes his place as President of the Eucharist. If the bishop is present, the Priest acts as one of the Apostles – receiving Holy Communion from the hands of Christ (the bishop), along with helping the bishop with anything he might need. The **Deacon** is exactly what his title says: a δίακονος, or 'assistant', to the Bishop. In the beginning, we read in the Book of Acts that deacons basically served tables to help the Apostles; now, they have a liturgical function.

The low-order clergy include **chanters** and **readers**. A prayer is read over them by the Bishop, who bestows on them the blessing to read and/or chant during the Divine Services. These people help the service *happen*. Without them, the service would be impossible to complete. Yet, just as important as they are, the second category is just as important.

The **laity**, or *λαός*, include members of the Choir, the Altar Servers and regular faithful that show up and pray during the Divine Services. These people are needed for the services to be complete. This is so because the Church is a *community of believers*, and not simply a “clergy club” with the laity “sitting in the cheap seats”. Every layperson, at their chrismation, is anointed with the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit. They join the “Royal Priesthood” of Christ and thus are just as important as the clergy.

Both groups of individuals, clergy and laity, are essential in the make-up of the Church. Although every faithful person has a role in the Church (which is why St. Paul asks the Corinthians in his letter, “Are **all** apostles? Are **all** prophets? Are **all** teachers?” – 1 Cor. 12:28) we always need to remember the Church is “incomplete” when one part is “missing”. All of us, as individuals, make up the Body of Christ – with Jesus as the Head.

Although not full-fledged members of the Church, catechumens are people that are learning about the Faith and will soon be baptized. Both catechumens and non-faithful (those who are neither catechumens nor baptized Orthodox Christians) are welcomed at the Divine Services to witness the services – although they cannot fully participate in the services.

Each person involved in the services is a small piece of the great mosaic that is the Church.

### **Map of the Service**

*For all intents and purposes, this part of the presentation will show the order of the service as it is performed today, with few remarks at the end regarding the different changes that took place over the centuries.*

*The following takes place only if there is a deacon present:* The phrase “It is time for the Lord to act” is part of a greater dialogue that takes place in which the clergy ask forgiveness from one another and ask God to make them worthy to celebrate and participate in the Divine Liturgy. Two big themes are present here: **forgiveness and unworthiness**. It is important that, before any Divine Liturgy, we all ask forgiveness from one another. Christ Himself forgave His crucifiers on the Cross; in the same way, we are called to forgive our brothers and sisters that hurt us and sin against us. Also, we should not think of the Divine Liturgy as a “reward” that we are receiving, as if fasting and confession have somehow ‘made us worthy’ to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. The priests remind themselves that “no one is worthy” (“οὐδεὶς ἄξιος”, as we will hear later on), and yet we receive God’s grace in this Sacrament because we are merciful.

The Priest then picks up the Book of the Gospels and exclaims, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever and unto the ages of ages!” The chanters and people respond with “Amen”, showing the *community* of believers worship

together. This proclamation reminds us that God's Kingdom has existed, exists and will always exist.

The Great Litany of Peace follows, with the deacon leading the worshippers to pray for: "the salvation of our souls...for peace in the whole world... for all the clergy and the laity...for every city and country...for the sick, the suffering, the captives...[and] to deliver us from all affliction, wrath, danger and distress" (amongst other things). To each of these prayers, the chanter and people respond, "**Lord, have mercy.**" (or, Κύριε, ελέησον), because only the Lord can grant these requests. There are no prayers for "a new car", for "the Leafs to win the Stanley Cup" or "for all parishioners to win the lottery". We ask Him to show mercy and love to us, His people, and grant us requests that lead to salvation.

A prayer of remembrance of the Most Holy Theotokos (along with all the saints) is recited, and then a final prayer to the Holy Trinity (half of which is said silently, half of which is said aloud) is exclaimed. A shorter version of this Litany ("the Small Litany") is said two more times.

In the midst of these three Litanies, different hymns are chanted. The first says, "By the prayers of the Theotokos (or, Mother of God), Saviour, save us!" The second exclaims, "Save us, O Son of God, who rose from the dead [or, *who art wonderful in the Saints*, for weekdays], we sing to You: Alleluia!" The third is the "Dismissal hymn" of the day. Each one of these hymns (called **Antiphons** or **Αντίφωνα**) is preceded by Scriptural verses from the Old Testament Book of Psalms. *In monasteries*, usually there are no Antiphons chanted – only the Psalms are chanted.

During the third Antiphon, **the First (or "Small") Entrance** takes place. The Priest says a prayer silently: "*Grant that holy Angels may enter with us that together we may serve and glorify Your goodness.*" The Altar Servers carry the candles, the Fans and the Cross, as the Deacon carries the Book of the Gospels around the Church (or, the Soleas). At the end of the hymn being chanted, the Deacon exclaims, "Wisdom! Arise!" This goes to signify that Christ, whose Truth is found in the pages of Scripture, is present amongst us; therefore, we should rise and pay the proper respect to the Book of the Gospels. The "Hymn of the Entrance" (or Εισοδικόν) is said. It is usually, "Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ!" Sometimes, it is replaced by another Old Testament scriptural verse that points to the significance of the day (for example, when we celebrate the Transfiguration, the verse is, "For from You is the fountain of Life, and in Your light we shall see Light!").

**Hymns** are chanted **after the Entrance** which include the *Apolytikion* of the day, the *Apolytikion* of the Church, and the *Kontakion* for the period (for example, the *Kontakion* of Christmas is chanted from Christmas Day to December 31<sup>st</sup>).

The Prayer and the **Thrice-Holy Hymn** is then prayed by the people. It is called "Thrice-Holy" as we say "Holy" three times ("Άγιος ο Θεός, Άγιος Ισχυρός, Άγιος Αθάνατος..."). The Priest says "Dynamis" for all to chant the hymn 'with some gusto'.

When a Bishop presides, there is a special typikon that is followed, which include the blessing of the people by the bishop's candles, asking God to "save the faithful" and praying that our bishop lives for "many years".

During certain feasts, we chant different hymns instead of "Holy God". For feasts of the Cross, we say, "We venerate Your Cross, O Christ, and Your Holy Resurrection we do hymn and glorify". For most feasts of the Lord, we chant "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have been clothed in Christ. Alleluia!" This is said because, in the early centuries, baptisms were conducted on these days.

**Readings** are then said: the *Epistle* is said by the reader, while the *Gospel* is read by the deacon. The readings are arranged by a lectionary (that is, they are pre-arranged for the year, with certain themes being chosen for certain times of the year – for example, the Resurrection is a big theme during the forty days after Pascha). Before the Gospel, the Priest reads the Prayer of the Gospel, which asks God to "Illumine our hearts...and open our eyes that we may comprehend the message of Your Gospel."

In today's practice, the Liturgy of the Word is then concluded with the **Prayers of the Catechumens**, which are said for all catechumens the Church has – and that they might join the Church worthily through the Sacrament of Baptism and Chrismation.

*Now, some short thoughts on the historical changes...*

1. For many years, the Liturgy actually began with the "First (or Small) Entrance". The people would walk together with the Clergy to the Church, the Bishop would read the Prayer of the Entrance and the people *literally entered* the Church at that time! **That** is why it's called the "Prayer of the Entrance" – because they *entered* then! Many centuries later, the metaphoric meaning of "Christ's preaching to the peoples" was applied to this practice.
2. *During the procession to the Church*, the people chanted the Antiphons.
3. Something our Church does not have is a piece of furniture that was present in all Churches: the *Synthronon*. The bishop's throne was not outside the Altar doors (in fact, the icon screen – or *iconostasis* – was not present where it is today in the early centuries of Christianity). The Emperor, in fact, had the seat of the Bishop. The Bishop sat at the back of the Altar (called "the High Place"). Just as the President of the Roman Senate was surrounded by others, the Bishop would be surrounded by his priests and deacons at the back of the Altar. This picture of the Bishop and the clergy surrounding the Altar, along with the people, is a very beautiful eschatological picture: it is just as Jesus will stand surrounded by the Prophets and Apostles, "to judge the living and the dead, whose Kingdom will have no end."
4. In some traditions, there was even an Old Testament reading put in before the Epistle. It is preserved in the Liturgy of St. James.
5. The trend to say prayers "silently" was first apparent during the time of Justinian and never "the norm" until the Turkish occupation. Canon Law during Justinian's time forbids prayers during the liturgy to be read silently.

6. After the readings, the **Sermon** was then preached. It makes perfect sense: the readings are still fresh in your mind, and the Bishop or Priest would sermonize on the topic. Today, we wait until before Holy Communion to preach because “we don’t have the numbers” to preach that early.
7. Catechumens would actually leave at the Dismissal of the Catechumens (as the prayer suggest). Today, we allow catechumens to stay until the end of the Liturgy.
8. Although the fans “look nice”, they aren’t to be used at the First (Small) Entrance. They are to bat flies away from the Gifts after the Great Entrance, later on in the Liturgy. So, only candles should be used during the Entrance.
9. The candles have acquired two meanings throughout the centuries. First, the practical meaning of having them: we forget that – in our day and age – we have *electricity*. In previous centuries, they needed the candles to have the entrances in Cathedral Churches and Monasteries. The allegorical meaning is that they symbolize St. John the Baptist, who declared his message for repentance before Christ (who is represented by the Book of the Gospels, held by the Deacon).

Having said all of the above, the majority of these things are not hindrances to our worship. They all are part of the worship cycle that our Church gives us in order to have what we need the most:

### **Encounter with Christ through our neighbour**

Throughout the entire Liturgy of the Word, the Scriptures are immersed in the text of the service (which is true for any part of the Liturgy, for that matter). The divine services seek to not have the believer as a “casual onlooker” when it comes to meeting Christ; rather, they are there to bring the believer face-to-face with Jesus, allowing Him to enter our hearts through worship. An ancient Christian saying says: “*lex orandi est lex credendi*” (the law of prayer is the law of belief), which shows that how we pray is our belief in action.

The Gnostics believed that they had a “special knowledge” about God. That’s why the Church differs from these people: the Church says that *anyone and everyone* can be saved who wishes to be saved. That is why we name it “liturgy”, *λειτουργία*, or “the work of the people”. Our prayers together are *the work of the people*, praising God together as a community, a family. Fr. Schemman calls this, “the Sacrament of the Assembly”:

The Liturgy is the ‘Sacrament of the Assembly’. Christ came to ‘gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad’ (Jn. 11:52), and from the very beginning the eucharist was a manifestation and realization of the unity of the new people of God, gathered by Christ and in Christ. We need to be thoroughly aware that we come to the temple not for individual prayer but to *assembly together as the Church...* unless one understands this, one cannot understand the rest of the celebration. (pages 22-23)

The encounter with Christ is because the ultimate aim of the Divine Liturgy is an eschatological one, an aim not for this world but for the next. The aim is to bring people

to know God in a completely different way, and to participate in His glory. In one word: it is for us to become *Holy*, to become *Saints*.

This encounter cannot happen, though, simply by looking at icons or attending worship. It is *living the worship*, which means one must have a relationship with their neighbour. When we come to Church, there are so many Sundays we come and sit next to the same people; yet, we don't bother to learn their name. We bow when the priest blesses us, but we don't ask forgiveness from our neighbour whom we might have hurt. We hear St. John the Evangelist's words, "whoever says they love God but hate their brother is a liar", but do not understand them.

*The Kingdom is Blessed* when we all *live* what the Kingdom's King wants us to do: love God and love our neighbour, knowing that the TIME comes for us to declare our love for Jesus Christ every Liturgy.