

## **The Orthodox Liturgy: Its Theology and Spirituality, Part Two**

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In the Liturgy, the Church ascends to heaven. Therefore, when she returns to the world after this ascent, she returns reflecting the light, joy, and peace of the Kingdom. She becomes a witness to the Kingdom in the midst of an anxious and troubled world.

For this reason, Orthodox liturgical texts address God first. They recall and make present the saving work (economy) that God accomplished for humanity and for our salvation. For example, Orthodox services conclude in a similar form: “O Christ our true God, who... for our salvation...” During the Paschal season we say: “who rose from the dead for our salvation.” At Christmas: “who was born of the Virgin in a cave for our salvation.” At Theophany: “who was baptized by John in the Jordan for our salvation.” At the Transfiguration: “who was transfigured on Mount Tabor before His holy disciples for our salvation.” At Pentecost: “who sent down the All-Holy Spirit upon His holy disciples for our salvation.” And so on throughout the year.

Salvation—accomplished by Christ in His incarnation, death, and resurrection—is central to the Liturgy. It is the foundation and purpose of Christian life. The goal of the Christian is salvation. He or she is a Christian who seeks salvation first, and then is a physician, an engineer, a merchant or an employee.

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Because salvation was accomplished through Christ’s incarnation and His saving acts, the Liturgy distributes across the year all the events of His work for us—from the Annunciation to the Theotokos, to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Thus the feasts unfold: Annunciation, Nativity, Circumcision, Baptism, Entrance into the Temple, Transfiguration, Crucifixion and Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost. The Church does not forget the events related to the Mother of God—her Nativity, Entrance into the Temple, and Dormition. This liturgical rhythm lifts Christians out of the routine of daily life and reorients them toward their essential goal: salvation. Moving from feast to feast, they live in constant anticipation of the Kingdom, until they arrive at the Feast of Feasts and Season of Seasons—Holy Pascha.

At every feast, in Vespers, Orthros, and the Divine Liturgy, we read and chant the meaning of the feast—its theology, its narrative, and the scriptural passages related

to it from both Old and New Testaments. All of this unfolds through chanting, processions, the elevation and veneration of the icon of the feast, the breaking of blessed bread, and ultimately participation in the Cup of Christ's Body and Blood. In this way, the faithful do not merely remember the event; they live it. They participate in it and allow it to become active in their personal lives and in the life of their community. The Liturgy becomes synergy—a shared work, a continual cooperation between Christ and us. We live within a rhythm that holds two measures: the measure of our awakened faith, and the measure of the event of faith itself.

For this reason, liturgical texts insist that what happened did not simply happen in the past—it happens *today*, because we live it “here and now.” We ceaselessly chant: “Today He is hung upon the Tree...” and “Today is the day of Resurrection...” and “Today He is born of the Virgin...”

What took place is no longer merely past, because it is present. As Saint John of Damascus says, “There is nothing new after the Incarnation.” In liturgical celebration, the Church remembers the saving acts God accomplished in history, fulfilled in the Cross and Resurrection. That Paschal event, which occurred once in history, has now become contemporary to every moment of our lives. Because Christ rose from the dead, He shattered the mortal wall of time. This remembrance is entirely new in nature. We are the ones who remember—but the reality we remember is no longer past. It is present. Thus, the Church's memory becomes a living presence of the saving event. This is the reality of the Liturgy.

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The liturgical texts also emphasize the theology of each event and the doctrine connected to it. They never neglect Christ's divinity at His Crucifixion, nor His resurrected, transfigured humanity at His Resurrection and Ascension. They stress His divine and human natures in every feast. In the Nativity services, we speak of God's condescension, His ancient promise, the union of the two natures, and the virginity of His Mother. In the Paschal services, we proclaim Christ's descent into Hades, His destruction of the kingdom of Satan, His trampling down death, the liberation of humanity from the powers of evil, and His bodily, real and glorified Resurrection.

The Orthodox Liturgy is deeply doctrinal in character. It is profoundly Trinitarian. In the liturgy of Theophany, the Holy Trinity is clearly revealed. In the liturgy of Pentecost, we find a precise description of the third Person—the Holy Spirit—without neglecting the Father and the Son or Their relationship.

One of the great gifts of the Liturgy is that it preserves the faith and doctrine within the heart of worshippers—even if they have never taken a formal theology course. An Orthodox Christian who prays cannot reduce Christianity to mere human sentimentality, because the Liturgy constantly draws him (her) upward. Among Orthodox Christians there is a spiritual saying: The theologian is the one who prays.

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Since all that happened occurred “for our salvation,” returning us to the Kingdom for which we were created, and restoring us to our original image so that we may be united with Him, the communion of saints becomes an active force in this journey. For this reason, the Orthodox Liturgy gives great attention to the saints—the models of authentic Christian life. Their commemorations fill the calendar. The faithful remember them by name. Those who bear the saint’s name celebrate his or her feast day. Their lives are read and contemplated in the daily services.

In the Orthodox Church, there are large volumes called the *Menaion* arranged day by day throughout the months of the year. These books contain hymns and prayers to reflect on the lives of the saints commemorated daily, highlighting their love for Christ, their faithfulness, and their repentance. There are special hymns for martyrs, hierarchs, righteous ones, teachers, and archangels. Many faithful learn and chant the hymn of their patron saint regularly.

Through the Liturgy, the saint becomes a friend to the believer—familiar, close, encouraging him to walk in the way of Christ and imitate Him. This closeness creates a deep sense of communion that is not hindered by death or geography. The saint becomes truly present. The believer asks for his prayers and turns to him, just as he asks for the prayers of his brothers and sisters standing beside him in the Church.

*(To be continued)*