

The Orthodox Liturgy: Its Theology and Spirituality, Part Three

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The Liturgy is concerned with the sanctification of time and of life, so that every act in the life of the world may become a blessed and holy act. In this way, the Liturgy draws the world toward the Kingdom and urges it to realize that Kingdom, for it is the very purpose of its existence.

The Orthodox liturgical year begins on September 1, the Church New Year, which coincides with the beginning of the new agricultural seasons. On this day, the Church asks God, the All-Merciful, to grant good seasons and abundant rains.

The Church blesses eggs at Pascha, grapes at the Transfiguration, and wheat, wine, and oil at every Great Vespers (in the Litia-Artoklasia) for a great feast or for a beloved saint. Palm branches are blessed on Palm Sunday. More recently, in a natural expression of the Orthodox Liturgy's role in sanctifying creation and educating and refining the faithful, a special liturgical service for the environment has been introduced. Its texts speak about the Christian's faithful stance toward the environment, asking God to grant us a good and proper use of His creation. At the same time, it reminds those gathered for prayer that environmental degradation is one of the signs of humanity's fall and the deepening of sin. Therefore, it calls us to repentance. This service is celebrated on Orthodox Environment Day, which coincides with the beginning of the liturgical year on September 1.

It is important to note that the Orthodox Liturgy engages the believer's five senses in worship. It makes use of melodies, icons, candles, incense, special vestments for the clergy, distinct garments for altar servers, the holy table, and the sanctuary curtains. The liturgical colors change according to the feasts and seasons. The sign of the Cross, prostrations, standing, and other gestures may appear, to an outside observer, excessively material. Yet, if we return to the Old Testament and study the temple rites commanded by God, we find them in harmony with this same vision especially when we consider the description of the heavenly liturgy in the Book of Revelation.

The purpose of all these arrangements is to allow the faithful to participate in worship with all their senses, to help the human person enter fully into worship with his entire being. Through the five senses, the whole person is engaged. At the same time, the believer is constantly reminded of his calling to restore the transfigured beauty of creation and to share in its splendor.

It is also worth noting that art in Orthodox worship is not used as it is in the world, but only after it has been purified and sanctified after it has been spiritualized. Thus, in the Orthodox Church, we do not find a “religious painting,” but an icon depicting the saint or the sacred event in a state of deification. Likewise, church music does not rely on musical instruments which are human inventions, but on the human voice, which is created by the Creator Himself: “Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, in behalf of all and for all.”

In speaking about the Orthodox Liturgy, we must not forget that it is profoundly biblical. It is entirely formed by Holy Scripture. The Psalms constitute its fundamental structure, and each service has its appointed psalms forming its basic framework. Every feast also has its own festal psalms and hymns. Readings from the Gospels and the Epistles are distributed daily throughout the liturgical year, covering the four Gospels and all the Epistles. From the Old Testament, passages are read at every Great Vespers for a great feast of the Lord or His Mother, or for a beloved saint, linking the event to the prophecies concerning it and teaching us to read the Old Testament in a Christian way, in the light of the New Testament. During Great Lent, almost the entire books of Isaiah, Genesis and Proverbs are read, along with passages from Job and other books, especially during Holy Week.

Moreover, many liturgical texts are written in a biblical spirit and incorporate scriptural language in their composition. We should also remember that the Holy Gospel always remains upon the holy altar in the sanctuary, and the priest carries it in procession, calling the faithful to its wisdom at every Divine Liturgy.

Finally, the Orthodox Liturgy teaches the believer that he lives not merely because he eats, but because he is preserved by the grace of God. It does not only teach this truth – it helps him to live it. The Church provides prayers for nearly every occasion in a person’s life: for the blessing of a home; for a child at birth and at his or her first entrance into the church; for the first day of school; before and after meals; before and after travel; before and after study; the blessing of a new car; and many others.

Orthodox liturgical services may appear long to an outside observer, but their length is not measured, in Orthodox understanding, by the number of hours they last, but by their spiritual benefit. Perhaps this story captures the Orthodox view of worship and its spirituality: After a Western monk visited Mount Athos and spent time among its monasteries, he asked an Orthodox monk there: “What do you do during this long time in church? Why are the services so long? What is the purpose? Would it not be better to do some work instead of remaining in church for such extended periods?” The monk replied: “What does a child do in its mother’s womb during the nine months it remains there? Can we grow, be formed, and become living beings in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, without this long abiding?”

One practical matter remains to be mentioned. There exists a complex organizational system, built upon experience and developed over time by the Holy Tradition, in order to celebrate worship in the best and most spiritually beneficial way. This includes the appointment of readers and chanters, the distribution of chanting between slower and faster tempos, and many other details that require special study. If this order is not always manifested in all its beauty in our churches, then the question of why must be directed to each one of us.