

# Worship & Sacraments

## The Role of the Liturgy

By its theological richness, spiritual significance, and variety, the worship of the Orthodox Church represents one of the most significant factors in this church's continuity and identity. It helps to account for the survival of Christianity during the many centuries of Muslim rule in the Middle East and the Balkans when the liturgy was the only source of religious knowledge or experience. Since liturgical practice was practically the only religious expression legally authorized in the former Soviet Union, the continuous existence of Orthodox communities in the region was also centred almost exclusively on the liturgy.

The concept that the church is most authentically itself when the congregation of the faithful is gathered together in worship is a basic expression of Eastern Christian experience. Without that concept it is impossible to understand the fundamentals of church structure in Orthodoxy, with the bishop functioning in his essential roles of teacher and high priest in the liturgy. Similarly, the personal experience of man's participation in divine life is understood in the framework of the continuous liturgical action of the community.

According to many authorities, one of the reasons that helps to explain why the Eastern liturgy has made a stronger impact on the Christian Church than has its Western counterpart is that it has always been viewed as a total experience, appealing simultaneously to the emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic faculties of man. The liturgy includes a variety of models, or symbols, using formal theological statements as well as bodily perceptions and gestures (e.g., music, incense, and prostrations) or the visual arts. All are meant to convey the content of the Christian faith to the educated and the non-educated alike. Participation in the liturgy implies familiarity with its models, and many of them are conditioned by the historical and cultural past of the church. Thus, the use of such an elaborate and ancient liturgy presupposes catechetical preparation. It may require an updating of the liturgical forms themselves. The Orthodox Church recognizes that liturgical forms are changeable and that, since the early church admitted a variety of liturgical traditions, such a variety is also possible today. Thus, Orthodox communities with Western rites now exist in Western Europe and in the Americas.

The Orthodox Church, however, has always been conservative in liturgical matters. This conservatism is due, in particular, to the absence of a central ecclesiastical authority that could enforce reforms and to the firm conviction of the church membership as a whole that the liturgy is the main vehicle and experience of true Christian beliefs. Consequently, reform of the liturgy is often considered as equivalent to a reform of the faith itself. However inconvenient this conservatism may be, the Orthodox liturgy has preserved many essential Christian values transmitted directly from the experience of the early church.

Throughout the centuries, the Orthodox liturgy has been richly embellished with cycles of hymns from a wide variety of sources. Byzantium (where the present Orthodox liturgical rite took shape), while keeping many biblical and early Christian elements, used the lavish resources of patristic theology and Greek poetry, as well as some gestures of imperial court ceremonial, in order to convey the realities of God's kingdom.

Normally, the content of the liturgy is directly accessible to the faithful, because the Byzantine tradition is committed to the use of any vernacular language in the liturgy. Translation of both Scriptures and liturgy into various languages was undertaken by the medieval Byzantines, as well as by modern Russian missionaries. Liturgical conservatism, however, leads de facto to the preservation of antiquated languages. The Byzantine Greek used in church services by the modern Greeks and the Old Slavonic still preserved by all the Slavs are at least as distant from the spoken languages as is the language of the King James Version—used in many Protestant Churches—from modern English.

## The Eucharistic Liturgies

Two Eucharistic liturgies are most generally used in Orthodox worship—i.e., the so-called liturgies of St. John Chrysostom and of St. Basil the Great. Both acquired their present shape by the 9th century, but it is generally recognized that the wording of the Eucharistic "canon" of the liturgy of St. Basil goes back to the 4th century—i.e., to St. Basil himself. The so-called Liturgy of St. James is used occasionally, especially in Jerusalem. During the period of Lent, a service of Communion, with elements (bread and wine) reserved from those consecrated on the previous Sunday, is celebrated in connection with the evening service of Vespers; it is called the "Liturgy of the Presanctified" and is attributed to St. Gregory the Great.

The liturgies of St. John Chrysostom and of St. Basil differ only in the text of the Eucharistic canon: their overall structures, established in the high middle ages, are identical.

These Eucharistic liturgies begin with an elaborate rite of preparation (proskomide). A priest on a separate "table of oblation" disposes on a paten (plate) the particles of bread that will symbolize the assembly of the saints, both living and dead, around Christ, the "Lamb of God." Then follows the "Liturgy of the Catechumens," which begins with a processional entrance of the priest into the sanctuary with the Gospel (Little Entrance) and which includes the traditional Christian "liturgy of the word"—i.e., the reading from the New Testament letters and the Gospels as well as a sermon. This part of the liturgy ends with the expulsion of the "catechumens," who, until they were baptized, were not admitted to the sacramental part of the service. The "Liturgy of the Faithful" includes another ceremonial procession of the priest into the sanctuary. He carries the bread and wine from the table of oblations to the altar (Great Entrance); the following recitation of the Nicene Creed, the Eucharistic canon, the Lord's Prayer, and Communion are—as in the West—the characteristic parts of the Byzantine "Liturgy of the Faithful." The bread used for the Eucharist is ordinary leavened bread; both elements (bread and wine) are distributed with a special spoon (labis).

## The Liturgical Cycles

One of the major characteristics of the Byzantine liturgical tradition is the wealth and variety of hymnodical texts marking the various cycles of the liturgical year. A special liturgical book contains the hymns for each of the main cycles. The daily cycle includes the offices of Hesperinos (Vespers), Apodeipnon (Compline), the midnight prayer, Orthros (Matins), and the four canonical "hours"—i.e., offices to be said at the "First" (6:00 AM), "Third" (9:00 AM), "Sixth" (12:00 noon), and "Ninth" (3:00 PM) hours. The liturgical book covering the daily cycle is called the Horologion ("The Book of Hours"). The Paschal (Easter) cycle is centred on the "Feast of Feasts"—i.e., of Christ's Resurrection; it includes the period of Great Fast (Lent), preceded by three Sundays of preparation and the period of 50 days following Easter. The hymns of the Lenten period are found in the Triodion (Three Odes), and those of the Easter season in the Pentekostarion (called the "Flowery Triodion"). The weekly cycle is the continuation of the Resurrection cycle found in the Triodion and the Pentekostarion; each week following the Sunday after Pentecost (50 days after Easter) possesses its own musical tone, or mode, in accordance with which all the hymns of the week are sung. There are eight tones whose composition is traditionally attributed to St. John of Damascus (8th century). Each week is centred on Sunday, the day of Christ's Resurrection.

The Easter and weekly cycles clearly dominate all offices of the entire year and illustrate the absolute centrality of the Resurrection in the Eastern understanding of the Christian message. The date of Easter, set at the Council of Nicaea (325), is the first Sunday after the full moon following the spring equinox. Differences between the East and West in computing the date exist because the Orthodox Church uses the Julian calendar for establishing the date of the equinox (hence a delay of 13 days) and also because of the tradition that Easter must necessarily follow the Jewish Passover and must never precede it or coincide with it. The yearly cycle includes the hymns for each of the 366 days of the calendar year, with its feasts and daily commemoration of saints. They are found in the 12 volumes of the Menaion ("Book of Months").

From the 6th to the 9th century the Byzantine Church experienced its golden age of creativity in the writing of hymns by outstanding poets such as John of Damascus. In more recent times hymn writing has generally

followed the accepted patterns set by these authors but rarely has it reached the quality of its models. Since the Eastern Orthodox tradition bans instrumental music, or accompaniment, the singing is always a cappella, with only a few exceptions admitted by Westernized parishes in America. The idea behind the ban is based upon the practice of worship in the New Testament; i.e., only the natural aptitudes of the living congregation are viewed as capable of expressing praise that is worthy of God. In many Orthodox churches there is a wealth of new musical compositions for liturgical texts.

## **The Sacraments**

Contemporary Orthodox catechisms and textbooks all affirm that the church recognizes seven mysteries, or "sacraments": Baptism, chrismation, Communion, holy orders, penance, anointing of the sick (the "extreme unction" of the medieval West), and marriage. Neither the liturgical book called Euchologion (prayer book), which contains the texts of the sacraments, nor the patristic tradition, however, formally limits the number of sacraments; they do not distinguish clearly between the "sacraments" and such acts as the blessing of water on Epiphany day or the burial service or the service for the tonsuring of a monk that in the West are called sacramentalia. In fact, no council recognized by the Orthodox Church ever defined the number of sacraments; it is only through the "Orthodox confessions" of the 17th century directed against the Reformation that the number seven has been generally accepted. The underlying sacramental theology of the Orthodox Church is based, however, on the notion that the ecclesiastical community is the unique mysteries, of which the various sacraments or sacramental are the normal expressions.

In the West, since the Scholastic period (Middle Ages) and, especially, since the Catholic Reformation (16th century), much emphasis has been placed on the vicarious juridical power of the minister to administer the sacraments validly. The Orthodox East, however, interprets each sacramental act as a prayer of the entire ecclesiastical community, led by the bishop or his representative, and also as a response of God, based upon Christ's promise to send the Holy Spirit upon the church. These two aspects of the sacrament exclude both magic and legalism: they imply that the Holy Spirit is given to free men and call for their responses. In the mysteries of the church, the participation of men in God is effected through their "cooperation" or "synergy"; to make this participation possible once more is the goal of the incarnation.

## **Baptism and Confirmation**

Baptism is normally performed by triple immersion as a sign of the death and Resurrection of Christ; thus, the rite appears essentially as a gift of new life. It is immediately followed by confirmation, performed by the priest who anoints the newly baptized Christian with "Holy Chrism" (oil) blessed by the bishop. Baptized and confirmed children are admitted to Holy Communion. By admitting children immediately after their Baptism to both confirmation and Communion, the Eastern Christian tradition maintains the positive meaning of Baptism—i.e., as the beginning of a new life nourished by the Eucharist.

## **The Eucharist**

There never has been, in the East, much speculation about the nature of the Eucharistic mystery. Both canons presently in use (that of St. Basil and that of St. John Chrysostom) include the "words of institution" ("This is my Body . . .," "This is my Blood . . ."), which are traditionally considered in the West as the formula necessary for the validity of the sacrament. In the East, however, the culminating point of the prayer is not in the remembrance of Christ's act but in the invocation of the Holy Spirit, which immediately follows: "Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon the Gifts here spread forth, and make this bread to be the precious Body of Thy Christ... ." Thus, the central mystery of Christianity is seen as being performed by the prayer of the church and through an invocation of the Spirit. The nature of the mystery that occurs in the bread and wine is signified by the term *metabole* ("sacramental change"). The Western term transubstantiation occurs only in some confessions of faith after the 17th century.

## **Orders**

The Orthodox Church recognizes three major orders: the diaconate, the priesthood, and the episcopate (bishop), as well as the minor orders of the lectorate and the sub-diaconate. All the ordinations are performed by a bishop and, normally, during the Eucharistic liturgy. The consecration of a bishop requires the participation of at least two or three bishops, as well as an election by a canonical synod.

## **Penance**

The sacrament of penance in the early church was a solemn and public act of reconciliation, through which an excommunicated sinner was readmitted into church membership. Historically it has evolved into a private act of confession through which every Christian's membership in the church is periodically renewed. In the Orthodox Church today there is a certain variety in both the practice and the rite of penance. In the churches of the Balkans and the Middle East, it fell into disuse during the four centuries of Turkish occupation but is gradually being restored today. In Greek-speaking churches only certain priests, especially appointed by the bishop, have the right to hear confessions. In Russia, on the contrary, confessions remained a standard practice that was generally required before communion. General or group confession, introduced by John of Kronshtadt, a Russian spiritual leader of the early 20th century, is also occasionally practiced. The rite of confession in the Euchologion retains the form of a prayer, or invocation, said by the priest for the remission of the penitent's sins. In the Slavic ritual a Latin-inspired and juridical form of personal absolution was introduced by Peter Mogila, metropolitan of Kiev (17th century). Confession, in Orthodox practice, is generally viewed as a form of spiritual healing rather than as a tribunal. The relative lack of legalism reflects the Eastern patristic approach to sin—i.e., as an internal passion and as an enslavement. The external sinful acts—which alone can be legally tried—are only manifestations of man's internal disease.

## **Anointing of the sick**

Anointing of the sick is a form of healing by prayer. In the Greek Church it is performed annually in church for the benefit of the entire congregation on the evening of Holy Wednesday.

## **Marriage**

Marriage is celebrated through a rite of crowning, performed with great solemnity and signifying an eternal union, sacramentally "projected" into the Kingdom of God. Orthodox theology of marriage insists on its sacramental eternity rather than its legal indissolubility. Thus, second marriages, in cases of either widowhood or divorce, are celebrated through a subdued penitential rite, and men who have been married more than once are not admitted to the priesthood. Remarriage after divorce is tolerated on the basis of the possibility that the sacrament of marriage was not originally received with the consciousness and responsibility that would have made it fully effective; according to this view, remarriage can be a second chance.

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