

The Significance of the Divine Liturgy

God approaches man

The book of Genesis reveals that God created man as the crown of His creation. Only concerning man does God say: "let us make man according to our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). God created us to share in His life. Unlike the fictional gods of human myth, who rule the cosmos from a great distance, our God, the true and living God, dwells with us! For this reason, the we sing at Great Compline, "God is with us, understand all ye nations, and submit yourselves, for God is with us."

Throughout the Holy Scriptures, God approaches man. While in Eden, Adam and Eve "heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden." (Gen. 3:8) Likewise, it was in the presence of the Lord that Noah found grace. (Gen. 6:8) God approached Moses as the burning bush, revealing Himself as the Existing One. (Exodus 3:14) God's ultimate approach was in becoming man in the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

After the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, God revealed His law to Moses. This law taught His people how to live and worship according to God's will. Upon receiving the law, God commanded Moses: "you shall make Me a sanctuary, and I will appear among you. According to all I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishing, so you shall make it." (Ex. 25:8-9) When King Solomon built the first temple at Jerusalem, the Lord blessed him, saying: "I consecrated this house you built to place My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there all the days." (3 Kingdoms/1 Kings 9:3)

In the Hebrew language, the word *holy* literally means "set apart". Thus, to be holy means to be set apart from the rest of the world, not followings its ways, but existing for a higher, divine purpose. The Psalmist proclaims, "holiness becometh Thy house, O Lord, unto length of days." (Ps. 92:6) Thus, saints are revealed to us and proclaimed so by the Church because they strove to follow God's will above all things. Throughout the Scriptures, Israel is called to be a nation and people set apart from the other nations, primarily because they would obey God's commandments and worship Him alone. Likewise, God has also set apart sacred spaces and times of the day, week, month, and year that are to be dedicated to Him.

The Church is the New Israel, also called to be set apart from other peoples. This setting apart begins with baptism and continues with living according to Christ's commandments, which are "foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18). Our setting apart also pertains to our

worship. For Orthodox Christians, the most important times are those set aside for prayer and worship. The greatest and most significant moment occurs when we attend the Divine Liturgy.

God approaches man in the Divine Liturgy in that same manner as we have shown in the Scriptures. Herein, God walks among us, we find grace in His presence, He reveals Himself as the Existing One, and we personally encounter Jesus Christ.

Blessed is the Kingdom

We begin the Divine Liturgy proclaiming, "Blessed is the Kingdom, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages." In doing so, we acknowledge that heaven and earth have come together in the church. We have entered Paradise, for "salvation is of the Lord, and Thy blessing is upon Thy people." (Ps. 3:9) This kingdom, this blessedness was, is, and shall be forever.

The Holy Apostle Paul reminds us that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Gal. 5:22) Thus, in entering the Kingdom, we live as the saints do. "In peace, let us pray to the Lord." We have been saved and now we pray for the salvation of the world. "Lord, have mercy" is our intercession for God's grace, blessing, and power. As we progress through the Divine Liturgy, we intersperse our hymns and lessons with these intercessory litanies. The antiphons, the hymns, the appointed troparia and kontakia give us the vocabulary of prayer. We praise God, His Mother, and the saints with the vocabulary employed for generations, reaching back to the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and which has sanctified the saints of each age. In praising God and interceding for the world, we enter into true peace and our hearts are ready to be instructed. The epistle and gospel lessons contain that instruction appointed by the Church for our salvation. The priest or bishop will pray that God illumines our hearts with the pure light of His divine knowledge.

The Image of the Cherubim

Having been so illumined by God's word, we pray and intercede more fervently. According to the ancient practice, those who were not communicants in the Church were dismissed during these prayers. Having thus prayed, we begin our journey to the heart of the Divine Liturgy. We are called to an angelic life, transforming ourselves into the image of cherubim. The cherubim guarded paradise after Adam and Eve's expulsion. King Hezekiah addressed God as "seated upon the Cherubim" (Isaiah 37:16) The Prophet Ezekiel, in a vision, saw that "the glory of the God of Israel was over and above them." (Ezekiel 10:18) Thus, we too, are called to become God's throne, bearing

and manifesting His glory. The Prophet Isaiah, in a vision, "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. The house was full of His glory. Around Him stood the seraphim... and one cried to another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Sabaoth; the whole earth of full of His glory.'" (Isaiah 6:1-3) This is the thrice-holy hymn and we too are called to be like the seraphim, surrounding God and crying out such praises to Him.

It is then that the gifts, the sacrifice of bread and wine, are brought out in the midst of God's people. On the patten bread has been prepared. In the center, the main portion represents Our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. This will soon become His Very Body. To His left, there is a portion representing the Mother of God and, to His right are portions in honor of the ranks of saints. Below Him are portions commemorating the living and the dead. Thus, the entire Church is present on the patten. It is brought out before the people with the prayer, "all of you, may the Lord God remember in His Kingdom, always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages." The priest or bishop places these offerings upon the altar, for we, "being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another." (Romans 12:5) For together, we shall receive the Christ Himself.

The Sacrifice of Praise

Once again, having been led to such heights, we intercede for the Church and for one another. Then, we manifest our oneness of faith, through proclaiming the Symbol of Faith, the Nicene Creed, for "no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3) Thus, in making such a proclamation, we invite the Holy Spirit into our midst.

Sacrifice carries an intrinsic link to worship and "every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices." (Heb. 8:3) In the Old Testament, the people of God offered up animal sacrifices. Yet, Our Lord Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross fulfilled the sacrificial ordinances of the Mosaic Law, for "with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." (Heb. 9:12) During the anaphora, we enter into Christ's sacrifice. Having offered up bread and wine, we now offer up mercy, peace, sacrifice, and song. The Mystical Supper that Christ shared with His disciples before His passion is now shared with us.

At the anaphora, the priest or bishop calls upon the Holy Spirit to come down upon us and upon these gifts of bread and wine. He invokes the Holy Spirit to change the faithful present into the Mystical Body of Christ and the bread and wine into the actual Body and Blood of Christ. This is the mystery of our faith. This is the miracle of miracles

which occurs at every Divine Liturgy. Our Lord Himself said, “whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.” (John 6:54-56)

Having accomplished such a holy deed, we turn our attention back to Our Lord’s incarnation according to the flesh. God became a man in the womb of the Virgin Mary and thus we sing a hymn to her. For in honoring her, we proclaim the great truth that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. This union makes possible our union with God.

Following this, we again intercede, perhaps now with greater boldness. The Holy Spirit has transformed us and the gifts that we have offered. Our Lord Jesus Christ is physically present upon the altar. We now with boldness and without condemnation pray to God the Father in the words of Our Savior gave us. The Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father”) is the foundational Christian prayer. In it we proclaim God’s holiness and might, we ask for His grace, mercy, and forgiveness and for deliverance from the evil one, who is the source of all our sinful passions and transgressions.

The Holy Things for the Holy

At this point, the curtain behind the royal doors is closed and the priest or bishop exclaims: “The Holy Things for the Holy” and the choir responds: “One is Holy, One is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.” Have we journeyed thus far simply to be shut out of the Heavenly Kingdom? A candle is placed outside the altar in front of the royal doors. This candle symbolizes the flaming sword “which turns every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Gen. 3:24) The meaning of the closed curtain and the candle lies not in their placement but rather when they are removed. The clergy commune in the altar free of all distractions. The choir sings hymns to prepare the faithful for their ascent. When all is ready, the curtain is opened, symbolizing the curtain of the Temple, which was “torn in two” (Matt. 27:51) once Christ’s sacrifice had been accomplished. The candle is removed, proclaiming that Paradise, from which our first ancestors fell, has been opened to us once again.

We approach the chalice with the fear of God, with faith, and with love. The faithful partake of Holy Communion, which although in the form and taste of bread and wine, is the actual Body and Blood of Our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. Only members of the Mystical Body of Christ- the Church, may receive the actual Body and Blood of Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us, “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the

Lord." (1 Cor. 11:26-28) Only those Orthodox Christians who have properly prepared themselves should approach the chalice.

We have seen the true light

Having received Holy Communion, we give thanks to God for His abundant grace and mercy. In receiving the Eucharist, we have been united to Our Lord Jesus Christ and given a foretaste of eternal paradise. Likewise, we are mystically united with every Orthodox Christian throughout the world who has received our Lord's Body and Blood.

The much-suffering Job, reflected on the ways of the wicked, saying, "they are ones on earth who do not know the Lord, and they do not understand the way of righteousness, nor do they walk in His paths. But He knows their works and delivered them into darkness...They do not know the light. For in due time, the shadow of death will be the same to them." (Job 24:13-14, 16-17) However, at the end of the Divine Liturgy, the faithful cry out in thanksgiving, "We have seen the true light, we have received the Heavenly Spirit, we found the True Faith in worshipping the Undivided Trinity, Who hath saved us."

Having given thanks, the Divine Liturgy comes to an end and we reenter the world. Yet, we return to the world bearing Christ Himself within us. Our Lord once taught, "you are the lights of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matt. 5:14, 16)

The Divine Liturgy lifts us up to the very throne of God. As Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Divine Law and as the three disciples ascended the mountain with Christ to behold His transfiguration, so have we been granted a divine ascent. Yet, such a blessing carries great responsibility. Moses delivered the Law to God's people and the disciples evangelized the known world. We are called to be the presence of Christ in the world, "praising God and having favor with all the people" and being the instruments through which the Lord will add to the Church those who are being saved. (Acts 2:47)

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