

Divine Liturgy I: Overview & Offertory

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

The Divine Liturgy is the heart of the Church. Everything else we have received — the Scriptures, the Fathers, the feasts, the rhythms of prayer — either prepares us for it, flows out of it, or draws us back to it. In this lesson we stand at the beginning of that great mystery. We trace it from the Upper Room of St. Mark to the altars of our own parishes. We look at the three Liturgies we have inherited — of St. Basil, of St. Gregory, and of St. Cyril — and at the long arc of prayer that leads from the Hour Prayers through the Offertory to the Distribution of the Mysteries. Finally we enter the Offertory itself: the vesting, the hand-washing, the choosing of the Lamb, the procession around the altar. What appears on the surface to be a long preparation is in fact the Church already kneeling at Calvary and already waiting at the empty tomb.

The First Liturgy: From the Upper Room to Alexandria

The Divine Liturgy was not invented by a committee of theologians. It was given. On the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord took bread in His hands, gave thanks, broke it, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." He took the cup and said, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:26–28). The house in which He spoke these words belonged, by a long tradition of the Church, to the mother of St. Mark the Evangelist. That same upper room would see the tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost. The first Eucharist and the birth of the Church happened under the same roof.

St. Mark himself was born in a devout Jewish household and was trained in the Scriptures from his childhood. Through his family he was bound to St. Peter by blood and by discipleship, and from Peter he learned the faith. When he traveled with Barnabas and Paul and eventually carried the Gospel into Egypt, he did not bring a loose memory of a meal. He brought an ordered prayer, a way of doing what the Lord had commanded.

"Do this in remembrance of Me." Luke 22:19

In Alexandria, after the conversion of Anianus the cobbler and the growth of a small but vigorous community, St. Mark set down the Liturgy that the Church of Egypt would pray after him. From that first Alexandrian Liturgy grew the Liturgy of St. Cyril. Alongside it, through the centuries, the Coptic Church received and kept the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great and the Liturgy of St. Gregory the

Theologian. These three Liturgies are not three religions; they are three voices of one Body, each reaching up to the one altar in heaven.

The Three Liturgies of the Coptic Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates the Eucharist from three Liturgies. All three are ancient, all three are Orthodox, and all three carry us to the same Body and the same Blood. They differ only in voice — in the way each Father leads the Church into the single mystery of the Cross.

The Liturgy of St. Basil was written by St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia. It is the Liturgy we pray most often, measured and theological, shaped by the same mind that gave the Church the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The Liturgy of St. Gregory was written by St. Gregory the Theologian, Archbishop of Constantinople and the close friend of St. Basil. It is the one Liturgy among the three addressed to the Son rather than to the Father, and it burns with personal fire — the Church speaking to Christ face to face. The Liturgy of St. Cyril is the direct descendant of St. Mark's original, translated from Greek into Coptic by St. Cyril of Alexandria, the Pillar of the Faith. It is the oldest in spirit and the most austere, and it preserves the particular shape of the Alexandrian tradition.

	Liturgy of St. Basil	Liturgy of St. Gregory	Liturgy of St. Cyril
Author	St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea	St. Gregory the Theologian, Archbishop of Constantinople	St. Mark (in Greek), translated into Coptic by St. Cyril of Alexandria
Addressed to	God the Father	God the Son	God the Father
Placement of litanies	After the consecration	After the consecration	Before the consecration
Common usage	Prayed most days	Prayed on feasts and days of joy	Prayed on occasion, especially in Great Lent and the Feast of St. Mark; many tunes lost

The difference in the placement of the litanies carries a quiet theology. In the Liturgies of St. Basil and St. Gregory, the litanies come after the change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ — as if to say, now that the Lord Himself is on the altar, we gather up every need of the world and lay it before Him. In the Liturgy of St. Cyril, the litanies come first — as if to say, let us clear every earthly concern out of the way now, so that when Christ is present on the altar our eyes and hearts are fixed on Him alone. Neither approach is a correction of the other. Both are Orthodox. Both teach us something true about what it means to stand before the Lord of glory.

"In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you."
John 14:2

The Structure of the Holy Liturgy

The Liturgy does not begin with the Offertory. It begins long before, in the quiet hours of prayer that bring the Church to the altar. To pray the Liturgy well is to enter at the door and not climb through the window. Our fathers have mapped the whole rhythm as follows:

- The 9th, 11th, and 12th Hour Prayers of the Agpeya
- Vespers Praise and the Vespers Raising of Incense
- The Midnight Hour Prayer and the Midnight Praises
- The 1st Hour Prayer, the Prime Praises, and the Prime Raising of Incense
- The 3rd and 6th Hour Prayers
- The Offertory
- The Liturgy of the Word
- The Liturgy of the Faithful
- The Distribution of the Holy Mysteries

Each stage has its own voice. The Hour Prayers stretch our day on the frame of Christ's Passion. The Praises join us to the angels who already stand around the throne. The Raising of Incense gathers the fragrance of our confession into one rising column. The Offertory lays the gifts upon the altar. The Liturgy of the Word opens the Scriptures so that we may know the One we are about to receive. The Liturgy of the Faithful consecrates the gifts. The Distribution places the Lord upon our tongues and within our hearts.

At the center of it all stands the Eucharist — from the Greek *eucharistia*, thanksgiving. A Sacrament, from the Latin word for that which is holy, corresponds to the Greek word *mysterion*, mystery. Our fathers have taught us that a Sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace: something we can see, and something we cannot. The bread we can see; the Body we cannot. The wine we can see; the Blood we cannot. The priest we can see; the Lord who works through him we cannot. The Liturgy is this whole structure of visible things opening onto unseen glory.

*"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?
The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?"* 1
Corinthians 10:16

Why So Much Repetition?

At first hearing, the Liturgy seems to circle back on itself. The Creed is prayed more than once. Graciously Accord is heard again and again. The priest says a petition in one language and the deacon answers with nearly the same words in another. To an untrained ear this can feel like unnecessary

repetition. It is not. It is the sediment of history laid down carefully, layer upon layer, so that no branch of the Church's tradition is lost.

The Vespers Raising of Incense and the Prime Raising of Incense are almost identical because they were born of different communities. Christians of Jewish background were accustomed to gathering on Saturday evenings, according to the older pattern of the synagogue. Christians from the Gentile world gathered on Sunday mornings, the day of the Resurrection. When the Church drew these two families into one, she did not ask either to forget what it had learned. She set the Liturgy on Sunday morning and kept the Saturday evening prayer as a vigil of preparation. What looks like repetition is in fact memory — the Church refusing to forget where her children came from.

The great echoes in the service come also from the joining of two streams of prayer: the Agpeya, which grew up in the monasteries, and the Psalmody, which grew up in the city churches. The monks prayed the Psalms by the hour; the city parishes trained their people in the faith through hymnody and theological verse. Over time these two rivers ran into one bed, and certain prayers — the Introduction to the Creed, the Creed itself, Hail to You, Graciously Accord — appeared in both and were kept in both. To lose them from one side would have been to amputate a living tradition.

The back-and-forth of priest and deacon has two explanations, and both are true. The priest, facing east, addresses God: "Remember, O Lord..." The deacon, facing the people, addresses the congregation: "Pray for..." One prays to the Father; the other calls the children to join their father's prayer. At the same time, many of these paired lines are given in Coptic by the priest and in Greek by the deacon, so that in the early Church no believer — whether a Coptic-speaking Egyptian or a Greek-speaking foreigner — was excluded from the prayer of the Body. What began as pastoral care for the whole people of God has become a small sign of our catholicity.

"That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me." John 17:21

The Offertory: Vestments, Preparation, and the Washing of Hands

The Offertory is the rite by which the bread and wine are brought to the altar to become the Body and Blood of Christ. Before anything is placed on the altar, the priest and the deacons are themselves prepared. They put on their vestments, they pray the canonical hours, and the priest washes his hands three times. Only then does he go out to choose the Lamb.

Every vestment says something. The stole laid across the deacon's shoulder evokes the wings of the angels who stand in constant readiness before God. The white garments of the priests and deacons recall the heavenly multitude that St. John the Theologian saw "standing before the throne... clothed with white robes" (Revelation 7:9). The altar is prepared with the same care that would be given to the Upper Room in Jerusalem. What was done once in a rented room in Zion is done again here, in our own church, because the Host is the same.

The washing of hands is no small matter. The priest washes three times, and the Scriptures he quietly prays are prayers of repentance rather than of hygiene:

"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice." Psalm 51:7-8

"I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will go about Your altar, O Lord, that I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all Your wondrous works." Psalm 26:6-7

Behind these prayers stands the whole priestly discipline of the Old Covenant, where the priests of the Temple were commanded to wash before they approached the sacrifice. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, preaching to the newly baptized in the fourth century, explains why the Christian hand-washing is not about dust on the fingers but dirt on the soul:

"You saw the deacon who offered the water for the washing of the hands of the celebrant and to the presbyters who encircled the altar of God. Not that he offered this water on account of any bodily uncleanness, for we did not enter the church unwashed; rather the ablution is a symbol of our obligation to be clean from all sins and transgressions. The hands symbolize action. So by washing them we signify plainly the purity and blamelessness of our conduct." St. Cyril of Jerusalem — Mystagogical Catechesis V

The priest is asking for a clean heart before he stretches out his hand toward the altar. Every member of the congregation is invited to make the same prayer their own. None of us approaches the Body of the Lord on the strength of our own worthiness. We approach on the strength of His mercy.

The Offertory: Choosing the Lamb

When the priest has washed his hands, he leaves the sanctuary to choose the Lamb. The bread that will become the Body of Christ is called the Korban — a Hebrew word meaning offering. Every element in the making of this bread carries Christ within it like a prophecy already fulfilled.

The Korban is made of wheat, for our Lord Himself said:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain." John 12:24

The wheat is crushed to become flour, for Isaiah prophesied that the Servant of the Lord would be "bruised for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). Yeast is added to the dough, representing the weight of the world's sin that the Lord bore in His own body; as the loaf is baked, the yeast dies in the oven, just as Christ put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Hebrews 9:26). The loaf is shaped like a circle with no beginning and no end, an image of the eternal Son who is "without father, without mother... having neither beginning of days nor end of life" (Hebrews 7:3). It is also the image of the Sun of Righteousness who rises with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2).

Around the Korban the priest and the deacon see twelve small crosses stamped into the bread, with one larger cross in the center. The twelve are the twelve disciples; the center is the Lord. Three points of the cross are pierced in remembrance of the three nails; the Spadikon, the central square (Greek for master), is pressed down into the loaf as the Body that holds all the rest together. The loaf must be whole and without break, for the Body of the Lord on the Cross was broken for us but not broken from itself. "Not one of His bones shall be broken" (John 19:36).

When the priest selects the loaf, he rubs it gently with slightly wet hands. This may well be an echo of the ancient rite on the Day of Atonement, where the high priest would lay his hands on the head of the sacrificial animal, transferring the sins of the people onto the offering (Leviticus 16). The priest prays, "Grant, O Lord, that our sacrifice may be accepted in Thy sight for my sins and for the ignorance of Thy people." Like Aaron, he confesses first for himself and only then for those entrusted to him.

After the Lamb is chosen, the priest wraps it in a veil. Behind this silent action stands the memory of another evening:

"Joseph of Arimathea... took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus... brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury." John 19:38–40

The Lamb is now ready to be carried to His tomb.

The Procession of the Lamb

The priest lifts the veiled Lamb and begins to walk around the altar. The deacons take up their tapers and go before him. The congregation lifts the ancient cry of Alel — Korban: "Praise the offering! Praise the great exchange!" For this is indeed the great exchange. The sinless Son of God takes upon Himself the sins of the world, and we in return receive the righteousness of Christ.

As the priest walks, he places his hand upon the Lamb and prays an inaudible prayer, naming before God those who have asked for prayers, those who are sick, those who are suffering. The congregation's own response is nothing other than the oldest cry of the human heart in the presence of God: "Lord, have mercy."

"God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Luke 18:13

The procession is no abstract choreography. It is the bearing of the Body of Christ to the tomb. The priest and the deacon stand in for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the two men who carried the Lord on that Friday evening at dusk. The deacons with their lit candles stand in for the angels who are always said by the Fathers to have attended the Lord throughout His passion, His death, and His burial. The priest places the Lamb upon the altar as upon a tomb hewn from rock.

Then comes the sealing. A cloth called the Procverin is laid over the chalice; this is the stone that was rolled against the door of the sepulcher. The triangular veil set upon it is the seal that was fixed to the stone. All of this is done in near silence, because we are now standing at the tomb of the Lord. The rest

of the Liturgy will unfold from this point forward as a slow, luminous movement from tomb to Resurrection.

The Signing, the Thanksgiving, and the Absolution of the Ministers

Three brief rites bring the Offertory to its close. First comes the Signing of the Offering: the priest traces the sign of the Cross over the bread and the wine, invoking God's blessing upon the gifts that will soon be changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Cross is set upon the gifts from the first moment, because the altar can never be separated from Golgotha.

Next comes the Prayer of Thanksgiving. The priest lifts the Church's heart to God in gratitude — for our creation, for our redemption, for the Son given for us, for the Spirit poured out upon us, for the gifts lying before us. The word Eucharist means thanksgiving, and every Liturgy begins with it because we come to this altar not as people who are owed anything by God, but as people who have been given everything.

Finally the priest prays the Absolution of the Ministers — a quiet, deliberate prayer for the forgiveness and purification of those who stand at the altar. None of them is worthy of what comes next. None of us is. The one standing at the altar confesses his weakness in front of God, and the whole congregation bows in its own confession. Only then is the Church ready to enter the Liturgy of the Word.

“For Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast.” 1
Corinthians 5:7–8

Everything up to this point has been preparation — hand-washing, vesting, choosing, wrapping, processing, sealing. None of it is ornamental. The Offertory is the Church learning, once again, how to approach the Most Holy. We do not rush toward the altar; we approach it slowly, with clean hands and a cleaner heart, bearing the Lamb in our own arms as Joseph bore Him once. We are not spectators at a ritual. We are pallbearers at the burial of the Lord — and, because of the empty tomb, we are also the first witnesses of the Resurrection.

Walking Through the Liturgy with the Whole Self

To know the shape of the Liturgy without entering it is to starve in a full house. The knowledge we have just laid out is meant to be carried back into our next Liturgy, and the next, and the next — not as information but as a disposition of the heart. When the priest vests, we vest ourselves in Christ (Galatians 3:27). When he washes his hands, we ask for a clean conscience. When he chooses the Lamb, we remember that we too have been chosen — in our baptism, in our chrismation, in every moment of repentance.

When the procession moves around the altar to the cry of Alel — Korban, we stop in our tracks and remember what is happening: the Body of the Lord is being carried to the tomb in our presence, and it is being carried for our sake. When the chalice is covered and the seal is laid, we wait in the silence of Holy Saturday, knowing that the next words of the service are already the first whispers of Easter morning.

In this way the Liturgy becomes not an hour among hours but the axis on which all our hours turn. Everything we do outside the church — our work, our study, our fasting, our friendships, our service — draws its strength from what is laid upon the altar, and returns to the altar at the next Liturgy to be laid there again.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.” Romans 12:1

The Liturgy teaches us how to become what we receive. May we learn to stand at the altar with the reverence of Joseph and Nicodemus, the watchfulness of the myrrh-bearing women, and the joy of those who have seen the empty tomb.



Review Questions

1. Where was the first Eucharist held? (A: St. Mark's home with Jesus Christ-The Last Supper)
2. List the structure of the Holy Liturgy. (A: 9th, 11th and 12th Hour Prayers, Vespers Praise, Vespers Raising of Incense, Midnight Hour Prayer, Midnight Praise, 1st Hour Prayer, Prime Praise, Prime Raising of Incense, 3rd & 6th Hour Prayers, The Offertory, The Liturgy of the Word, The Liturgy of the Faithful, The Distribution of the Holy Communion)
3. What are the 3 Liturgies that the Coptic Orthodox Church prays from? (A: The Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Cyril)
4. What do the Liturgies of St. Basil and St. Cyril address? (A: God the Father)
5. The offertory consists of 6 parts, what are they? (A: Preparatory, Choosing the Lamb, Procession of the Lamb around the altar, Signing of the Offering, Prayer of Thanksgiving, The Absolution of Ministers)



Books & References

Scripture:

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Divine Liturgy (Introduction).
- Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar, Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah (The Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service).
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem — Mystagogical Catechesis V (on the washing of hands and the Eucharist).
- St. Basil the Great — Liturgy of St. Basil (as prayed in the Coptic Rite).
- St. Gregory the Theologian — Liturgy of St. Gregory.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria — Liturgy of St. Cyril (translation of the Liturgy of St. Mark).
- • Fr. Athanasius Iskander, [Understanding the Liturgy](#).
- Fr. Tadros Malaty, The Divine Liturgy: An Introduction.
- https://www.suscopts.org/ssc/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/01-Raising_of_Incense.pdf

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.