

Divine Liturgy III: Liturgy of the Faithful

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Having heard the Word, the Church now approaches the altar. The Liturgy of the Faithful is the holy of holies of our worship, the hour in which the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the hour in which Christ is once again "in the midst of us." From the lifting of the prosphorine at the empty tomb, through the Creed and the Holy Kiss, through the Anaphora and the Institution Narrative, to the Epiclesis, the Fraction, the Absolution, the Confession, and the Distribution, every movement bears us into the paschal mystery. This lesson walks through the whole arc.

The Three Long Litanies and the Empty Tomb

The Liturgy of the Faithful opens with the Three Long Litanies — for Peace, for the Fathers, and for the Assemblies. At the head of these litanies the priest lifts the prosphorine, the small cloth covering that has lain over the chalice since the sealing of the tomb, and he offers incense beneath it. This is no ordinary gesture. It is the first Easter morning.

"Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared."

Luke 24:1

The rising incense is the spice offered by the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb of the Lord. The lifted cloth is the first hint of the stone rolled away. The Church, standing in the person of those holy women, approaches the altar at dawn. What they found at the tomb, we will find at the altar — the Lord is risen. Before we pass through that door, however, we pray for the world that still walks in the darkness of Holy Saturday: for the peace of the Church, for the shepherds who feed us, and for the assemblies of the faithful gathered in every place on earth.

The Creed and the Washing of the Priest's Hands

Only the baptized remain at this point in the Liturgy; the Creed is the confession of those who are already inside the Body of Christ. The deacon lifts his voice: "Attend to God with wisdom. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Truly we believe in one God..." and the whole congregation joins in. The Creed is not recited in private; it is sung in unison, because it is the voice of the Church, not the voice of an individual.

Our fathers have taught us that two things are needed before we can stand at the altar: faith and love. The Creed is the Church's great act of faith. The Holy Kiss that follows will be the Church's act of love. Without both we are not ready to approach.

While the Creed is being recited, the priest washes his hands — not for the first time in this Liturgy, but now with a different weight. He washes three times, in honor of the Holy Trinity, and then faces west toward the people and shakes the water from his hands. Three things are being said at once.

First, the priest reminds the whole Church that Holy Communion must not be taken lightly. Hands must be clean. Hearts must be cleaner. Second, the priest "washes his hands" of the guilt of those who receive unworthily; he will not carry into his own soul what a communicant chooses to carry into his. Third, the priest's hand must be clean to touch the Body of Christ, because in a few minutes those very hands will lift the Lamb of God. What the priest does visibly, the rest of the Church is called to do invisibly.

"I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will go about Your altar, O Lord." Psalm 26:6

The Prayer of Reconciliation and the Holy Kiss

Reconciliation is the restoration of a broken relationship. In the Prayer of Reconciliation the priest asks, on behalf of all of us, for forgiveness. We confess ourselves sinners, and we ask to be made worthy of the Body and Blood we are about to receive. The grace of forgiveness does not stay in the sanctuary; it spreads through the whole church, and it gives peace to every heart.

At this moment the priest lifts the seal from the chalice. The triangular veil comes off; the stone is rolled away. The prosphorine is raised, and Christ rises in our midst. The deacon then cries out:

"Greet one another with a holy kiss." 2 Corinthians 13:12

This is no empty greeting. It is the sign that the whole Church has become one heart and one mind. Faith has been proclaimed in the Creed. Hope has been stirred by the open tomb. Love has been enacted in the holy kiss. Now, and only now, is the Church ready to enter the Anaphora.

The Anaphora — Lifting Up Our Hearts

Anaphora is a Greek word meaning "lifting up." The whole central prayer of the Liturgy bears this name, because it is the prayer in which priest and people together lift their hearts to heaven. Facing west, the priest proclaims, "The Lord be with you all," and the congregation answers, "And also with your spirit." He then crosses himself and turns: "Lift up your hearts." The answer is both an invitation and a confession: "We have them with the Lord."

This is not a figure of speech. The priest and the people are asked to set aside, as with a physical motion, every earthly concern. The anxiety about work, the fight that happened in the car on the way to church, the question of what we will eat after the Liturgy — all of it is set down at the door of the Anaphora. St. Paul gives the reason:

"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." Colossians 3:1–2

Then the priest crosses himself again and says, "Let us give thanks to the Lord." The word Eucharist means thanksgiving, and the whole Liturgy takes its name from these words. The people answer, "It is meet and right." The priest lifts his covered hands in the posture of the Seraphim who stand before the throne, and he prays three ancient prayers — "Meet and Right...", "Before Whom stand...", "You are He around Whom stand..." — drawing the Church up to the very doors of heaven.

The Church then breaks into the Agios, a hymn that is almost a small creed of its own. In three stanzas it confesses the faith we have just proclaimed:

- "Who formed us, created us, and placed us in the paradise of joy... when we disobeyed Your commandment... You visited us through Your holy prophets, and in the last days You manifested Yourself through Your Only-Begotten Son Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin St. Mary."
- "Was incarnate, became man, taught us the way of salvation, granted us the birth from above through water and Spirit, and gave Himself up unto death on account of our sins."
- "He rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into the heavens, sat at the right hand of the Father, and appointed a day for recompense."

Creation, fall, prophets, incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, judgment to come — the whole arc of salvation is gathered into three breaths.

The Institution Narrative

At the heart of the Anaphora stands the Institution Narrative — the telling of what Christ did and said on the night He was betrayed. The priest stops narrating about the Lord and begins speaking in the Lord's own voice. The deacons surround the altar with lit candles. The priest places two corporals on the altar, those small linen cloths that will hold the sacred fragments without loss. The deacon brings the censer, and the priest censes his hands three times, a final purification before he touches what is about to become the Body of Christ.

Then he takes the bread in his hands. The words are no longer an explanation; they are a re-enactment. The priest does not say, "Jesus took bread and said, take eat." He says, as Christ Himself said,

"Take, eat from it, all of you; for this is My Body which is broken for you and for many, given for the remission of sins. Do this in remembrance of Me." From the Liturgy of St. Basil, after Matthew 26:26 and 1 Corinthians 11:24

And over the chalice, he prays:

“Drink from it, all of you; for this is My Blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins. Do this in remembrance of Me.” From the Liturgy of St. Basil, after Matthew 26:27–28

In the Old Testament, when the high priest spoke the holy name of God on the Day of Atonement, the whole congregation prostrated themselves to the ground. Our Church has inherited something of that reverence. In these moments at the altar, the congregation does not crane its neck to see; it lowers its head to pray. What is happening is the working of the Holy Spirit, not a piece of liturgical theater.

The Epiclesis — the Descent of the Holy Spirit

The Epiclesis is the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts. It is the moment in which the Church asks God the Father to send His Spirit upon the bread and wine and upon the people, so that what lies on the altar may become what the Church confesses it to be: the Body and Blood of Christ. The priest bows low and prays:

“And we ask You, O Lord our God, we Your sinful and unworthy servants; we worship You by the pleasure of Your goodness: that Your Holy Spirit descend upon us and upon these gifts set forth, and purify them, change them, and manifest them as a sanctification of Your saints.” From the Liturgy of St. Basil (Coptic)

The Epiclesis asks for three things at once. The Spirit is asked to purify the gifts, to change them into the Body and Blood of Christ, and to manifest them as a sanctification for the faithful. The change is not a symbol, and it is not magic; it is the work of the Spirit of God, the same Spirit who brooded over the waters at creation, who overshadowed the Virgin at the incarnation, and who fell on the Apostles at Pentecost.

The Epiclesis is also the moment in which the Church itself is remade. The Spirit is asked to descend "upon us" before He is asked to descend "upon these gifts." The Eucharist does not sanctify the bread in isolation; it sanctifies the Body, and the Body is the Church. What is changed on the altar is changed in us.

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” 1 Corinthians 12:13

The Anamnesis and the Seven Short Litanies

Anamnesis is a Greek word meaning "remembrance," but it means far more than an act of memory. In the biblical sense, to remember is to make present. The priest declares:

“For every time you eat of this Bread and drink of this Cup you preach My death, confess My Resurrection, and remember Me till I come.” From the Liturgy of St. Basil, after 1 Corinthians 11:26

"As we too commemorate His Holy Passion, His Resurrection from the dead, His ascension into the heavens..." The Anamnesis is not a souvenir of Calvary. It is Calvary made present. What is offered on the altar is the one sacrifice, offered once and for all by Christ on the Cross, now brought into the here and now for the salvation of those gathered around it.

Having stood at Calvary and Easter together, the Church now begins to carry the world up to the altar. This is the work of the Seven Short Litanies: for peace; for the Pope and the bishops; for the clergy and the deacons; for the purity of the people; for the salvation of the world; for the waters, the seeds, and the fruits of the earth; and for the gifts just offered. Every need of creation is laid at the feet of the risen Lord who is now really present on the altar.

After the litanies, the Church makes her Commemoration of the Saints. She does not attempt to name them all; she names those who laid the foundation of the faith — the forefathers of the Church, the fathers and mothers of the monastic life, the pillars of every age. We name them because they are not absent. The Liturgy that we celebrate on earth is the same Liturgy that they celebrate before the throne.

The Introduction to the Fraction, the Fraction, and the Absolution

The Fraction is the breaking of the Holy Bread. Before it is done, the priest offers a sign of peace to the people, and then he steps aside — a small and significant motion. He is saying, in effect, I can do no more. The peace that comes next does not come from me. Christ is on the altar. Let Him give it.

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you."

John 14:27

Then the priest breaks the Bread. The Fraction has its own prayer for every season of the Coptic year — one for the Nativity, another for Great Lent, another for the Resurrection, another for the Apostles' Fast, and so on — so that the Body of the Lord is broken with the voice of the season around it. This is one of the holiest moments of the entire Liturgy. The congregation stands in reverence, silent and attentive. What the priest holds in his hands is the sacrifice of Calvary.

After the Fraction, the whole Church recites the Our Father, and the deacon bids the people bow their heads. The bow is not an act of worship but of reception; it is the posture for receiving absolution. While the heads of the Church are bowed, the priest prays the prayer of Absolution, asking Christ to forgive our sins and make us worthy of the Communion that is coming.

A note often missed: the Absolution is not a ritual for confession. Those who have serious sin are expected to have sought absolution through the sacrament of Confession before they approach the Liturgy. The Absolution at this moment is a final cleansing of small things, a final pouring of mercy before the Lord is placed on our tongues.

The Confession and the Distribution

The priest now raises his voice once more. He takes the Body in his hand and proclaims to the congregation what is about to happen. This is the Confession of faith in the Real Presence:

"This is in truth the Body and Blood of Emmanuel our God. Amen." From the prayers of the Confession in the Liturgy

The deacon answers on behalf of the whole Church: "We too believe and confess that this is the faith by which we partake of His Holy Body and Blood." This is no abstract theology. It is a question the Lord Himself once asked, and the Church's answer has never changed:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you." John 6:53

No one should approach the chalice with a heart that does not confess this. A communicant who comes to the altar in doubt, in insincerity, or in unrepented sin does not diminish the Eucharist; he injures himself. This is why the Church insists that the Confession be made with the lips and with the heart together.

Then the congregation rises from its bowed worship and the Distribution begins. The choir sings Psalm 150 — "Praise God in His sanctuary... Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet... Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." The air of the church changes. We have passed through the Cross and the empty tomb; now we stand inside the Resurrection, and we sing.

The posture matters. The faithful stand to receive. They do not slouch, do not put their hands in their pockets, do not talk, do not rush. They receive the Body on their tongue and the Blood on their lips with the same reverence with which the myrrh-bearing women received the news of the Resurrection. This is the food that will carry us through the week. This is the medicine of immortality. This is what saves us from the evil of this world.

"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." John 6:56

The End of the Liturgy: Dismissals and Going Forth

When the Distribution is complete, the priest cleanses the vessels of the altar with great care. Not a single fragment of the Body of Christ may be left behind. After this comes a small and tender rite that is easy to miss. The priest uses water to dismiss the Angel of the Sacrifice. The Church teaches that every Liturgy has its own angel, assigned by God to watch over the altar and carry the prayers of the congregation. When the Liturgy ends, that angel is sent back to heaven with a blessing. Then the priest uses water to bless and dismiss the people themselves.

The two gestures belong together. The heavenly servants and the earthly servants are both released from their sacred duty with the same hand and the same water. The altar is cleared; the angel returns to the throne; the faithful are sent out into the world.

But "sent out" is not the same as "done." The Greek word from which our word "Mass" is sometimes derived, *missa*, is simply the word for dismissal. The Liturgy ends with a sending. We are not sent away

from Christ; we are sent with Christ, carrying Him within us to the streets, to the homes, to the offices, to the classrooms of our own week.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19–20

The Liturgy of the Faithful teaches us how to become what we have received. We have stood at the tomb with the myrrh-bearing women; we have stood at Calvary with the Mother and the Beloved Disciple; we have stood in the heavenly throne room with the Seraphim; we have received the risen Lord Himself into our bodies. Now we step back out of the doors of the church as people who have met the Lord of glory, and we carry that meeting into every ordinary hour. Amen.



Review Questions

1. When the Priest lifts the prosphering and offers incense under it, what does this represent? (A: It is to commemorate when the 3 Mary's came early Sunday to Christ's tomb)
2. In our church the Creed is important because we need 2 things before we can continue with the liturgy, what are these 2 things? (A: Faith and Love)
3. The hymn Agios is a hymn filled with the basics of Christian dogma, what are they? (A: Formed us, created us...disobeyed his commandments, Was incarnate, became man, granted us the birth, He rose from the dead, ascended into the heavens, appointed a day for recompense.)
4. What is The Epiclesis? (A: The Epiclesis is a prayer that the Holy Spirit descends upon the Bread and Wine and changes them into the Body and the Blood of Christ and to sanctify the whole church members)
5. What is the Anamnesis? (A: It is a living proclamation for Jesus' death and resurrection and remembrance of Him until His Coming.)



Scripture:

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Divine Liturgy (Introduction).
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem — Mystagogical Catechesis V (on the washing of hands and the Eucharist).
- St. John Chrysostom — Homilies on the Gospels and on the Pauline Epistles.
- • 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.