

Midnight Praises

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

The Midnight Praises are the Church awake in the middle of the night, training herself for heaven. They are the hinge between the day that has ended and the Liturgy that is coming. They are the work that the angels already do, that our fathers have taught us to do alongside them. In this lesson we study the Psalmody that shapes this vigil: its Jewish roots in the Book of Psalms, the four Hos-es that lead us from the Red Sea to the heavenly Jerusalem, the Lobsh that explains what we have just sung, the Psali that names the Lord in every verse, the Theotokia that gathers the Old and New Testaments around the Mother of God, and the Doxology that glorifies the saints and the feasts. We learn the difference between the Adam days and the Watos days. We learn why watchfulness — not emotion, not music — is the theme. And we learn why our fathers rose in the middle of the night to do this: because the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and those who keep watch will open the door to Him.

Introduction to Praising

Praise is not a decoration on the edges of the Church's life. It is one of her chief works. It is the meeting-place of the Struggling Church still on earth and the Victorious Church already in heaven. It is also the proper work of the angels, and when we join them we are stepping, for a moment, into their office.

"Praise Him, all His angels; praise Him, all His hosts!" Psalm 148:2

When we lift our voices in the middle of the night, we are not alone. The angels are already praising. The saints are already praising. We are training our lips for the language we will speak forever. And we are making ready for the banquet of the King, because the Divine Liturgy always follows the Praises, and the Praises prepare the heart that will receive the Body and the Blood.

This is not a medieval invention. We see it in the earliest Church in Jerusalem, where the first believers carried their worship from the Temple to each other's homes.

"So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God." Acts 2:46-47

The Church of the Apostles was a Church that praised. The midnight vigil simply carries that first impulse into the quietest hour of the night, where the distractions of the day have fallen away and nothing is left but the voice that says, Lord, have mercy.

Praise as Living Sacrifice

St. Paul tells us what worship is. It is not a performance; it is an offering. It is the whole self brought to the altar.

"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

In the Divine Liturgy the deacon says of our offering, A mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise. The sacrifice of praise is the particular name for what we do in the Psalmody. It is the lifting of the heart and the lifting of the hands at the hour when the world is asleep.

"Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." Psalm 141:2

The sacrifice of praise is offered with the body. God prepared a body for His Son precisely so that the Son could offer it.

"Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me." Hebrews 10:5

We follow the Lord in this. We do not send our prayers from a distance. We bring our bodies to the vigil. We stand when we could sit. We sing when we could sleep. And the reward of this small sacrifice is eternal.

"Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." Hebrews 13:15

The Heavenly Connection

We never praise God alone. The Psalmist already knew this.

"I will praise You with my whole heart; before the gods I sing praises to You." Psalm 138:1

And we pray toward the day when the dividing wall between the Struggling Church and the Victorious Church falls away altogether, and the praise of the saints becomes our praise too.

"Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty firmament! ... Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." Psalm 150:1, 6

When we sing the Midnight Praises we are not making sound into an empty room. We are joining a chorus that never stops. The angels are singing Holy, holy, holy. The saints are singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. The voice of our small congregation, alone in the dark church, is caught up into that unbroken song.

Praising at Midnight

The service of praising came into the Church from the Jewish tradition, in which the Book of Psalms was the chief prayer-book of the people of God. The Psalmody is the Church's continuation of that tradition, expanded by the Holy Spirit into hymns that the Old Testament could only point toward.

St. Basil the Great explains why this particular work draws heaven so near:

“The work of praising attracts the service of the angels, because this is part of their job, and they come closer to those who do the same as they.” — St. Basil the Great

The angels, whose proper office is to praise, are drawn to the souls who praise. When we imitate their work, they come near. This is why the fathers chose the midnight hour for this vigil. It was the hour of the Bridegroom's coming. It was the hour when distractions had been stripped away. It was the hour the Lord spent in Gethsemane, when His disciples could not watch with Him even one hour. To rise at midnight is to answer, Yes, Lord, we will watch with You now.

The Psalmody is not a collection of songs. It is a deep spiritual monument, built on the shape of the Holy Liturgy, placed in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Its words come from the Bible — especially the Psalms — and from profound theology held in the Theotokias and the Psalis. Its tunes are a language of their own. It is a whole world, and the rest of this lesson is a walk through its rooms.

Terminology: The Language of the Psalmody

Before we walk through the Midnight Praises, we learn the Church's vocabulary.

- Psalmody — the book of praises itself. The annual Psalmody contains all the praises prayed during the year. The Kiahk Psalmody is much fuller and is prayed during the month of Kiahk in preparation for the Nativity. The Church also keeps a Lenten Psalmody, a Resurrection/Pentecost Psalmody, and an Apostles' Psalmody.
- Hos (plural Hos-es) — a Coptic word meaning praise. Four Hos-es are prayed in the Midnight Praises.
- Lobsh — a Coptic word meaning explanation. Two Lobsh-es are prayed, one after the First Hos and one after the Second, drawing out the meaning of what has just been sung.
- Psali — from a Greek word meaning song. There are Psalis for the Lord, for the Virgin Mary, for the Three Holy Youth (sung after the Third Hos), and for the saints and the seasons of the Church.
- Theotokia — from the Greek Theotokos, Mother of God. There is one Theotokia for each day of the week. The Theotokias were introduced by St. Cyril of Alexandria after the Council of Ephesus refuted the heresy of Nestorius.
- Doxology — from the Greek meaning glorification or veneration. A Doxology may be offered for any saint or angel, for any feast or any fast.

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- Antiphonarium (Defnar) — from the Greek for a book of antiphons. An antiphon is a psalm, anthem, or verse sung by two choirs answering each other, and the Defnar contains a brief life and veneration of the saint of each day.

Adam Days and Watos Days

The Midnight Praises change with the day of the week. The Church divides her week into Adam days and Watos days.

Adam is the Coptic word for the name Adam, and it signifies a musical structure of six beats to the measure. It also names the first three days of the week — Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday — together with their hymns and tunes. The name is taken from the first word of the Monday Theotokia, Adam eti efoi, While Adam was sad.

Watos is the Coptic word meaning bush, and it signifies a musical structure of eight beats to the measure. It names the last four days of the week — Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday — together with their hymns and tunes. The name is taken from the first word of the Thursday Theotokia, Pivatos eta Moisis, The bush which Moses has seen.

Two tempos, two moods, two tunings of the same heart. Six beats for Adam, the fallen and rising man. Eight beats for the Bush that burned and was not consumed. Both lead to the same altar.

The Shape of the Midnight Praises

The Psalmody begins where the Agpeya begins: with the psalms of the midnight hours. These are not additions before the real service. They are the first entrance into the service. Following them come the three watches of Gethsemane, each with its own Gospel.

- First watch — the foolish virgins who had no oil. The warning of unreadiness.
- Second watch — the oil used, the sins forgiven, the lamp trimmed again.
- Third watch — the urgent command to stay awake, to watch, because we know neither the day nor the hour.

After the three watches the Church sings Ten Theno. The opening of this hymn is drawn out in a long, contemplative tune, and then the rest of the hymn continues at its normal pace. Ten Theno is composed of pieces drawn from the midnight hour prayers and from the prayers that follow Psalm 50 (Have mercy upon me, O God). The name itself is an invitation:

“Arise, O children of the light, let us praise the Lord of hosts.” — from the hymn Ten Theno

The Church does not wake her children gently. She calls them the children of the light and commands them to rise.

Watchfulness: The Theme of the Praises

The theme of the Midnight Praises is not praise itself. It is watchfulness. Watchfulness is the condition in which praise becomes possible.

“In Your light we see light.” Psalm 36:9

To be watchful is to stand in the light of Christ, and in that light the person of Christ is revealed, and the revealed Christ becomes the reason for praise. Watchfulness is not anxiety. It is attention. It is the opposite of the sleep of the spirit. The word watch is one of the most frequent words in the New Testament for a reason. Our Lord repeats it to the Apostles in Gethsemane. Watch and pray. Could you not watch with Me one hour? The Midnight Praises are the Church's answer to that question. Yes, Lord. For at least this one hour, every night, we can.

Watchfulness does not end when the Praises end. It becomes a way of walking. The pre-servant who learns to stay awake with the Lord at midnight will find herself staying awake with Him through the rest of the week.

Tennav: Let Us Look at the Resurrection

After Ten Theno the Church sings Tennav, which means Let us look at the resurrection of Christ. Tennav is prayed from the Feast of the Resurrection through the Fifty Holy Days of Pentecost, and after that on every Sunday until the end of the month of Hatour. The effect is quiet but strong: through most of the year the Church is allowed to remain with the open tomb.

The fathers taught that the person who stays up and watches in her spiritual life will one day see Christ the way St. Mary Magdalene saw Him on the morning of the Resurrection — first as a stranger, then, at the calling of her name, as the risen Lord. To sing Tennav is to rehearse that morning. At the end of Hatour the Church begins her cycle again, walking through the life of Christ day by day until His Ascension, so that the yearly calendar is itself a long act of watching.

The First Hos: The Hymn of Victory (Exodus 15)

The Psalmody itself begins with the First Hos, taken from the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus. This is the hymn Moses and Israel sang after they crossed the Red Sea dry-shod and watched the hand of the Lord close the waters over Pharaoh's chariots. It was the song of a people who had been slaves and who were now free.

“Your right hand, O Lord, is glorious in power; Your right hand, O Lord, has dashed the enemy in pieces.” Exodus 15:6

For the Church, the Red Sea is not only a body of water in Sinai. It is a figure of Holy Baptism. Pharaoh is a figure of the devil. The Israelites coming up out of the sea are a figure of every soul that has been baptized and has come up out of the water into the freedom of the children of God. Whenever we sing the First Hos we are singing the song of the one who has been rescued.

St. John saw the same song sung in heaven, by those who had finished the race:

“They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!’” Revelation 15:3

The Earthly Church and the Heavenly Church are singing the same hymn. We sing it every day because, after the Resurrection, we have authority over Satan and because, by the grace of God, we will keep singing it until the Lord returns.

The Second Hos: Psalm 135, the Hymn of Thanksgiving

The Second Hos is Psalm 135. Its setting is the wilderness, the years between the Red Sea and the Promised Land. The world we live in is our wilderness. We have been delivered; we have not yet arrived. In this in-between we are asked to do what the Israelites mostly failed to do: to give thanks.

The Second Hos teaches the Struggling Church her most basic discipline. Deliverance has already happened. The Promised Land is not yet here. The right response is not grumbling but thanksgiving. The Hos repeats, like a heartbeat, the line *For His mercy endures forever*. The mercy that led Israel out of Egypt is the mercy that leads us through each day of the week. The Second Hos is the answer the wilderness generation did not know how to give, and it is placed into our mouths so that we will learn to give it.

The Third Hos: The Praise of the Three Holy Youth

The Third Hos is drawn from Daniel 3, the hymn of the three young men in the fiery furnace. Cast into the fire for refusing to worship the golden image, they were met in the middle of the flames by a fourth figure like a Son of God, and they walked unharmed. Out of the furnace they sang a hymn that commanded every part of creation to praise the Lord.

“Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord; praise and exalt Him above all forever.”
Song of the Three Holy Youth

The Third Hos is the New Testament Hos, because the fourth figure in the furnace is Christ. It carries forty verses, and forty is the number of perfection — the forty days of the Lord's fast and His victory over the tempter, the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension, the forty-day fast of Moses on Sinai. The Third Hos teaches us the Orthodox understanding of peace. Peace is not the absence of trial. Peace is the presence of Christ in the middle of the trial. In the furnace, with the Fourth Man walking beside us, we can command all creation to praise.

Tenen: Teach Us to Be Living Sacrifices

Tenen is the praise that follows, and it turns again to the three holy youth. It asks us to be living sacrifices as they were — willing to walk into the fire rather than bow to the image.

The act of the vigil itself is the first step of that sacrifice. The very thing we are doing at midnight — staying up, praying, praising when our bodies would rather sleep — is a small fire we have chosen to walk into. Tenen does not teach us an abstract theory of sacrifice. It tells us what to do with the hour

we are in. Offer this one. Begin here. The three youths who stood in the fire of Nebuchadnezzar were the same kind of soul as the pre-servant who stands in the dim light of a church at midnight, praying when she could be sleeping. This is where living sacrifice begins.

The Commemoration of the Saints

After the Third Hos the Church turns to the saints. We ask the Victorious Church to pray for the Struggling Church. We gather into one prayer the whole family of God — the prophets of the Old Testament, the Apostles and martyrs of the New, the fathers of the monasteries and the deserts, the holy virgins and confessors.

The Commemoration of the Saints is not a pause in the Praises. It is the joining of the choirs. Through the first three Hos-es we have walked from the Red Sea (the Old Testament), through Psalm 135 (the wilderness of this life), to the fiery furnace (the Lord Incarnate with His own). Now we reach the choir that stands beyond the veil. The saints are not watching us from a distance. They are praying with us, and we ask them to.

The Fourth Hos: A Symphony of Heavenly Praise (Psalms 148–150)

The Fourth Hos is Psalms 148, 149, and 150. Some of our fathers say that with the end of these three psalms the first half of the Tasbeha is complete, and before the Fourth Hos resumes the Church repeats Eleison imas, Have mercy on us, as if washing her face again before walking into the throne-room.

The Fourth Hos is the praise of heaven. Here the worshipper has crossed the Red Sea, has passed through the wilderness with thanksgiving, has stood in the furnace with the Fourth Man, and has been gathered with the saints. She now stands, in spirit, in the heavenly Jerusalem, where praise is the native language of the angels. The Fourth Hos is the command that every order of being — sun and moon, stars and clouds, sea creatures and mountains, kings and all peoples, young men and virgins, old men and children — lift up the same voice.

We praise Him because He has made us like the angels. We praise Him because He has allowed us to join the Victorious Church. We praise Him because the Fourth Hos is already happening, and He has graciously let us in.

The Psali: The Name of Christ in Every Verse

After the Fourth Hos the Church sings the Psali. The Psali is a poem of praise whose signature is the constant, unbroken repetition of the Name of Christ in its verses.

The Psali begins by praising the Creator — the God who brought all things out of nothing. Then it praises His Mother, the Theotokos, through whom He came into His own creation. The repetition of the Name of Christ is not mechanical. It is an anchor. The mind of the worshipper drifts easily at midnight. The Psali drops the Name of Jesus like a chain into the deep of her soul and ties her to Him. Every

verse, the Name again. Every phrase, the Name again. Slowly the mind stops wandering. Slowly the heart begins to notice that the Name it is repeating is also the Name it loves.

The Theotokia: Symbols of St. Mary in the Old and New Testaments

The Theotokia is the last great hymn of the Psalmody before its closing prayers, and it is one of the tallest mountains in the whole Coptic liturgical tradition. There is a different Theotokia for each day of the week, introduced by St. Cyril of Alexandria after the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, when the Church's faith in the Theotokos, the Mother of God, was defended against the heresy of Nestorius.

The Theotokia gathers into a single hymn all the symbols of the Virgin Mary that the Old and New Testaments give us: the Burning Bush that was not consumed, the Ladder of Jacob, the Ark of the Covenant, the closed Eastern Gate of Ezekiel, the unhewn Mountain of Daniel, the Tabernacle, the Cloud, the Temple. The Theotokia does not invent these titles. It finds them in the text. It shows that when the Holy Spirit inspired the Law and the Prophets, He was already drawing the portrait of the woman who would carry the Word of God.

Our fathers teach that whoever reaches the Theotokia in the Tasbeha is being received, in a quiet and mysterious way, into the bosom of St. Mary in heaven. This is an honor many strive for. It is not an honor earned by effort. It is an honor given to the one who has been willing to stay awake with her Son.

Living the Praises: The Microcosm of the Spiritual Journey

The Midnight Praises are not a long service appended to the Liturgy. They are a journey, and they are a small, perfect picture of the whole spiritual life. We come out of the slavery of Egypt through the Red Sea of Baptism. We walk through the wilderness of this world with thanksgiving on our lips. We stand in the furnace of our trials with Christ beside us. We are gathered with the saints. We are lifted, for a while, into the heavenly Jerusalem, where the angels are already at work. And through it all the theme is one theme: watchfulness.

The Church invites us to participate in this life of praise — not as hearers, not as spectators, but as living sacrifices, consciously presenting our bodies, our time, and our sleep to the Lord. The Midnight Praises are not only something we attend. They are something we become. As we learn to watch, to give thanks, to trust Christ in the fire, to keep the Mother of God in our hearts, and to sing with the angels, we are being made into the kind of souls who are ready for the banquet. And the banquet is already near. The Divine Liturgy is about to begin.



Review Questions

1. True or false? We praise with four hos, sung consecutively with no interruptions. (A:

False)

2. Who or what is the first hos dedicated to? (A: The hymn of victory.)
3. Are we just praising God when we praise? (A: No, the heavenly as well.)
4. What is the theme throughout each prayer? (A: Watchfulness.)
5. Who or what was the second hos dedicated to? (A: Giving thanks.)
6. Who or what was the third hos dedicated to? (A: Praising the three holy youths.)
7. What is our goal when praising? (A: To act as a living sacrifice.)
8. Who is tenen dedicated for? (A: The three youths, once again.)
9. True or false? Psalms are a major component of praise. (A: True)
10. What does the word “watos” mean? (A: It means bush.)



Books & References

Scripture:

- Psalm 148:2; Psalm 150; Psalm 141:2; Psalm 36:9; Psalm 138:1 — the praise of angels and the Church.
- Romans 12:1; Hebrews 10:5; Hebrews 13:15 — the living sacrifice and the sacrifice of praise.
- Acts 2:46–47 — the praising Church of the Apostles.
- Exodus 15; Revelation 15:3 — the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (First Hos).
- Psalm 135 — Second Hos, the hymn of thanksgiving.
- Daniel 3; the Song of the Three Holy Youth — Third Hos.
- Psalms 148, 149, 150 — Fourth Hos.

Further Reading:

All Scripture quoted from the New King James Version.



Powerpoint Presentations

 TRAD101.1 - Traditions in the Orthodox Church.pptx

 TRAD101.2 - Baptism.pptx

 TRAD101.3 - Myron.pptx

 TRAD101.4 - Spirituality of the Raising of Incense.pptx

 TRAD102.1 - The Divine Liturgy 1 - Overview and Offertory.pptx

 TRAD102.2 - The Divine Liturgy 2 - Liturgy of the Word.pptx .

 TRAD103.3 - The Divine Liturgy 3 - Liturgy of the Faithful.pptx

 TRAD301.1 - Feast of the Cross.pptx

 TRAD301.2 - Midnight Praises.pptx