

7. A Brief Introduction to the Divine Liturgy

The Divine Liturgy is the heart of the Orthodox Church's life. While the Church has many beautiful services and many means of receiving grace, none is greater than the Liturgy. In it, we partake of Christ's precious Body and Blood, through which we are healed and transformed. We could say that the Divine Liturgy constitutes the Church, which *is* the community of God's people gathered for the Eucharistic meal. At every Divine Liturgy the whole universal Body of Christ is present: Christ as the Head, with His angels and all the Saints, the bishops and clergy that He has appointed to serve His flock, and all His faithful people. Moreover, it is on behalf of all creation that the Church in the Liturgy glorifies the One God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Just before His suffering and crucifixion the Lord established the Mystical Supper, explaining to His disciples the meaning of His suffering before it happened and providing a way for all Christians to receive the perfect gift of His sacrifice. In St. John's Gospel, the Lord teaches clearly, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." (John 6:53) Thus, we benefit from the Lord's death on the Cross not merely in some abstract way, but by a concrete partaking of it, through our offering to Him of the simple gifts of bread and wine, which He offers back as the infinitely greater Gifts of His Body and Blood. Our proper response is to give thanks with all our hearts, from which we have the name "Eucharist," which means "thanksgiving."

In the Liturgy, we recount all of Christ's saving ministry. The Proskomidi (preparation of the gifts), entrances (processions), readings, and Eucharistic prayers speak to us of our tragic human history, on the one hand. On the other hand they proclaim God's providence throughout history, of Christ's incarnation and saving ministry, and of His ever-memorable suffering and sacrifice upon the Cross, His rising again from the dead, His ascension into heaven, and His glorious second coming. Above all, the Lord is presented to us as our suffering Savior, who humbles Himself even unto death on the Cross, and exchanges His life with ours. In return for the brokenness of our lives, we receive back the abundance of the Divine life which Christ came to give us.

The Liturgy is God's activity in our midst, together with our "Amen!" to that activity. In it, we are not "re-enacting the last supper." The Mystical Supper is not a past event, but an eternal, heavenly event. Heavenly worship — as described for example in Revelation 4-5 — continues uninterrupted. In the Liturgy, we are simply stepping into the heavenly banquet hall where the banquet is already underway. Our part — our "Amen" — is to give our hearts over completely to the work God wishes to do within us there.

Thus, our goal should be to come to the Liturgy as prepared as possible, which means with humble awareness of our sinfulness and unworthiness, but with strong hope in God's ability to save and heal us. We want to offer our whole being to God, that He might heal our whole being. The bread and the wine that we as a community offer, and which is returned to us as something infinitely greater, is an image of what can happen in our lives when we offer ourselves humbly and sincerely in the Liturgy. And we should also come with a desire not only for our own salvation but for that of "all mankind," so that our prayer can unite with the prayer of the Church in the Liturgy, which is "on behalf of all, and for all."