**Archimandrite Ephrem Lash, A Simple Commentary on the Divine Liturgy.**

**Introduction.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The older books of the Liturgies of St Basil and St John Chrysostom add in the title, ‘as celebrated in the Great Church and on the Holy Mountain’, that is to say the Church of the Holy Wisdom, Ἁγία Σοφία, and Mount Athos, τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος. These two places are the benchmarks for Orthodox Liturgy.

**1. The Proskomidi, Part One.**

In St Luke’s Gospel we read that on the first Easter Sunday two of Jesus’ disciples were walking from Jerusalem to a nearby village, called Emmaus, discussing sadly the events of the past few days. Jesus joined them, but they did not recognise him. As they walked he explained to them how all that had happened to him had been foretold in the Bible. When they reached the village they persuaded him to stay and eat with them. As they sat at the table, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. At this moment he vanished from their sight and they realized that it was Jesus. They hurried back to Jerusalem to announce the good news that Jesus was alive, that he had risen from the dead. It is this journey to Emmaus that we take every time we take part in the Divine Liturgy in church.

During the coming months we plan to give you a brief explanation of what happens on the journey of the Divine Liturgy and of what part we ourselves should play in it. As the story in the Gospel makes clear, the Liturgy consists of two main parts: the Liturgy of the Word, often called the Liturgy of the Catechumens, and the Liturgy of the Lord’s Supper, often called the Liturgy of the Faithful. In the old days only those who had been baptized were allowed to stay for the Liturgy of the Faithful. Those who were still being instructed, or, to use the Greek word, catechized, the Catechumens, could only attend the first part of the service. They were solemnly dismissed by the Deacon before the Cherubic Hymn.

Before the Liturgy begins there are preparations to be made. The most important is spiritual preparation. The service books tell the clergy that before celebrating the Liturgy they must have no enmity towards any one, following our Lord’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering.’ This command of our Lord’s does not only apply to the clergy, but to all of us who come to take part in the Liturgy. The clergy also get ready by putting on their vestments, washing their hands and preparing the bread and wine. This they normally do while the morning service of Orthros, or Matins, is being sung, or while the Hours are being read. Although this preparation is done out of sight of the congregation, it is important to have some idea of the meaning of this part of the Liturgy. As Christ did at the Last Supper, the Church uses bread and wine mixed with water. In the Orthodox Churches we use leavened bread for the Liturgy, because in St John’s Gospel the Mystical Supper and the Crucifixion took place before the Jewish Passover.

The Western Churches in general use unleavened bread, following the other Gospels, which say that the Last Supper was the Passover Supper, when only unleavened bread is allowed. At one time this difference of practice often became a point of violent disagreement between East and West. Greek churches normally use one large loaf, while the Slav churches use five small ones. On Mt Athos it is common to use two. We mix water with the wine because in the ancient world it was usual to drink wine diluted with water. Theodoret says that one of the reasons Noλ did not commit a sin by getting drunk was that he did not know that one should water one’s wine before drinking it. Not to do so was a mark of a binge drinker.

The bread for the Liturgy is usually baked by members of the community as part of their service, or liturgy, to God on behalf of the community.

**2. The Proskomidi, Part Two: ‘He took bread.’**

The loaf used for the Liturgy is known as the *Prosphora*, which is Greek for ‘offering’. The top is marked out with a ‘seal’, or *sphragida*, consisting of various letters and symbols.



In the centre is a square divided by a cross, with the letters **IΣ ΧΣ NI KA**, which stand for the words **JESUS CHRIST CONQUERS**. Above and below are two similar squares. To the left of the central square is a triangle with the letters **MΘ**, which stand for **MOTHER OF GOD** (ΜΗΤΗΡ ΘΕΟΥ). To the right are nine small triangles in three rows of three.



With the Lance the priest cuts from the loaf a cube, with the central square marked on it, and places it on the paten, or *diskos*.  This is the Lamb, which will be consecrated and distributed in Communion. He pierces the right side of the Lamb, saying the words from the Gospel, ‘One of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance, and immediately there came out blood and water’.  He then pours wine and water into the cup, or chalice.



Next he cuts out the triangle that represents the Mother of God and places it to the left of the Lamb and then the nine small triangles, which he places on the right. These represent various categories of Saint: Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, Ascetics, Unmercenary Saints, the Saint of the day and the Saint of the Liturgy. There are nine triangles to represent the Nine Choirs of Angels. He then cuts a triangle from the prosphora to commemorate the Bishop and places it below the Lamb. Below this he places small pieces, also cut from the prosphora, to commemorate all those people, living and dead, whom he wants to remember, including himself and the Bishop who ordained him, and those whose names he has been asked to remember by other people. These names should be given to the priest as early as possible, preferably during Matins, but at the latest before the Great Entrance after the Gospel. This includes names for Memorial Services and Feasts, *Eortes*.

The priest now covers the paten and chalice with three veils, one for each of the vessels and one large one, called the Aer, to cover the other two. Before this, to keep the arrangement on the paten from being upset by the veil, he places a metal ‘frame’, formed like a cross with bent arms, called the Star, on the paten. Each of these objects is blessed with incense before being set in place. Originally the Star represented the vault of the sky above the round world, represented by the paten. At the centre of the world stands Christ, the Lamb, surrounded by all humankind, from the creation to the present day. Every Liturgy is a cosmic event, celebrating the world’s salvation through the death and resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour.

The priest now censes the gifts and says a Prayer of Offering. The deacon, if there is one, or the priest himself then censes the Holy Table, the whole Sanctuary and the church. Everything is now ready for the Divine Liturgy. With the Holy Doors open, the priest takes his place in front of the Holy Table, says the prayer to the Holy Spirit, ‘Heavenly King’, the hymn of the Angels, ‘Glory to God in the highest’ and, from King David’s psalm of repentance, ‘Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise’. The Liturgy can now begin.

**3. The Opening: ‘In peace let us pray to the Lord.’**

The Liturgy, like nearly all Orthodox services, begins with a blessing. This is part of the Old Testament and Jewish heritage of Christianity. To bless, in both Greek and Latin, means ‘to speak well of’, and for us human beings to bless God means to acknowledge our utter dependence on him, to express our gratitude to him, to acknowledge that all we are and have is from him. The Hebrew word for a blessing, *berakah*, is translated in Greek by both *evlogia* and *efcharistia*, and so the whole Liturgy, the Eucharist, is a blessing, a thanksgiving to God. But God also blesses us, above all in the gift of his Son, who became man, brought us the *Evangelion*, the Good News of salvation and died for us on the Cross and rose in glory on the third day. This is what the Liturgy is all about. So the priest, as he sings the opening blessing, makes the sign of the Cross over the holy Table with the book of the holy Gospel. When there is a deacon he invites the priest to give the blessing with the words ‘Master, give the blessing’. The word ‘Master’, in Greek *Despota*, reminds both priest and people that the normal celebrant of the Liturgy is the bishop and a simple priest celebrates as the bishop’s representative. The Liturgy is always that of the whole Church, built on the foundation of the Apostles, whose successor the bishop is.

The blessing is followed the first of the litanies, or prayers of supplication, that are a characteristic of Orthodox worship. This litany is often known as the ‘**Litany of Peace**’, *ta Eirenika*, because the first three petitions all ask for peace. ‘Peace’, a word which is used some thirty times in the Liturgy, is not simply an absence of conflict. It is to live in harmony with God, with oneself, with all humankind and with the natural world of which we are part. It is above all a gift from God, which, as St Paul writes to the Philippians, ‘is beyond all understanding’. It is the gift that comes with the birth of Jesus, as the angels’ hymn proclaims, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, goodwill among men’. It is how Jesus sends away those he has healed or forgiven, ‘Go in peace’. It is how he greets the Apostles after his resurrection and it is how the bishop and priest greet the people in all the services. ‘*Shalom*’, in Hebrew, and ’*Salaam*’, in Arabic, is also the usual greeting among our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters.

The Litany of Peace brings before God the whole world, the churches, the local Bishop, the clergy and the whole people of God. **We then pray for the civil authorities of the country in which the Liturgy is being celebrated, whether or not they are Orthodox.**This has been the practice of the Church since the days of the Apostles. St Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, writes, ‘First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. This is good and pleasing to God our Saviour, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.’

Next we pray not only for the city in which we celebrate the Liturgy, but for all other places and for the believers who live in them. Despite all our technical progress, we are still dependent on nature, on the weather, for our livelihood, and so we pray for ‘favourable weather’ and for a good harvest. Finally we pray for all those in danger and trouble, travellers, the sick and those in prison.

The Church does not only consist of those on earth, it includes all those who have gone before us, and so we associate with our prayer the Mother of God and all the Saints as we ‘entrust ourselves and one another to Christ, our God’. The Litany begins with ‘peace’ and ends with ‘Christ, our God’.

The Litany is followed by an ‘Antiphon’, a series of verses each followed by a refrain. In early days the Liturgy began with what we now call the ‘Little Entrance’. In Constantinople the people came in processions, singing psalms, and assembled in the forecourt of the Great Church of Agia Sophia, to await the arrival of the Patriarch and the Emperor. On some occasions they might wait inside the church singing psalms and praying. The Litany of Peace, with the Antiphons and short Litanies that follow, is a survival of the older practice.

The second Antiphon is followed by a sort on mini-Creed, the hymn ‘Only-begotten Son’, *O Monogenes*. It is an excellent summary of the essentials of our faith in the Holy Trinity and in the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ the Word. It dates from the sixth century and is often attributed to the Emperor Justinian, but may well have been written by Severos of Antioch. Be that as it may, it is well worth learning by heart and it forms a fitting prelude to the solemn Entrance with the book of the Holy Gospel.

**4. The Entrance with the Holy Gospel: ‘Come let us Worship and fall down before God.’**

The hymn ‘Only-begotten Son’, which ends the second Antiphon, was originally the Entrance Hymn, *Eisodikon*, of the Liturgy, as it still is in the Liturgy of St James. Originally this was the beginning of the Liturgy and the clergy came, not from the Altar, but from Narthex, or vestibule, through main door of the church. This is traditionally known as the Royal Gate, *Vasiliki Pyli.*

Today when the singers begin the third Antiphon, the Priest takes up the book of the Gospels and going round the holy Table anti-clockwise he leaves the Altar by the north door of the icon screen, preceded by a server with a lighted candle, and goes to the centre of the church. Standing in the middle of the church the Priest blesses the Entrance, with the words, ‘Blessed is the entrance of your holy ones, always, now and for ever, and to the ages of ages’. We are ‘holy ones’, the ‘saints’.

In the Old Testament, God says to his people a number of times, ‘Be holy, because I am holy’ [Leviticus 11:44], and St Peter repeats this in his first Letter to his fellow Christians. In a number of places St Paul calls the Christians ‘saints’. By our baptism we have been ‘sanctified’, ‘made holy’, as the prayers of the service of Baptism make clear. Our task as Christians is to become what we already are. In the Liturgy, just before Communion, we are reminded of this again, when the Priest raises the holy Bread, the Body of Christ, saying, ‘the Holy Things for the Holy [ones]’. That is, us.

During the Entrance it is usual to sing the Apolytikion of the Sunday or Feast. The Apolytikion is the hymn that precedes the Dismissal (Greek *Apolysis*) at Vespers*.* It is the characteristic hymn of the day or the feast, and is used at all the offices and at the Liturgy. It is often a brief summary of the meaning of the feast. We should become familiar with the Apolytikia of the great feast and of our own patron Saint.

If a Bishop is the celebrant, he stays outside the Altar for the whole of the opening Litany and the Antiphons. The clergy, with the Gospels, join him in the middle of the church. The deacon, or the priest, if there is no deacon, raises the Gospel book high and exclaims, ‘Wisdom! Stand upright!’ The Gospel book is an icon of Christ, the Wisdom of God. It is never bound in leather, that is in the skin of a dead animal, but if possible in metal, sometimes gilded or silver, and frequently ornamented with jewels and enamelled. One cover is normally adorned with an icon of the Crucifixion, and the other with one of Descent of Christ into Hades, the traditional Orthodox image of the Resurrection.

As we begin the Liturgy proper we are invited to stand up and give all our attention to where we are and what we are doing. Standing and facing East is the traditional Orthodox posture of prayer. Indeed the First Synod of Nicea in 325 forbade kneeling on Sundays and during the fifty days from Pascha to Pentecost.

Clergy and Singers chant the Entrance Hymn, while the clergy enter the Altar through the Holy Door, or Beautiful Gate, *Oraia Pyli*, to begin the Liturgy of the Word.

**5. The Liturgy of the Word: ‘Holy God. Holy Strong. Holy Immortal.’**

As the clergy enter the Altar, the singers chant the hymns appointed for the day. On most Sundays these consist of the Apolytikion of the Resurrection, that of Dedication of the Church and the Kontakion of the season. On ordinary Sundays we sing the Kontakion of the Mother of God, ‘Protection of Christians’, but before and after the great feasts we sing their special kontakia. For example, from 27 July until 13 August we sing the kontakion of the Transfiguration. Ideally the people should join in singing these hymns, most of which are well-known and set to simple tunes. The singers are there to lead the people of God in singing; they should not usurp the people’s part in the service. There are places in the Liturgy where more elaborate music is called for, such as the Cherubic Hymn, but the people should be encouraged to sing the simpler hymns and responses, not discouraged by glares from the psalterion if they join in, as sometimes happens. When a Bishop celebrates he censes the Altar, the icons and the people at this point, to mark the beginning of the Liturgy proper.

After the hymns for the day have been sung there comes the solemn singing of the Trisagion, thrice-holy hymn to the Most Holy Trinity, ‘Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us’. This is one of the most important and oldest of our  Orthodox hymns and is said near the beginning and end of almost every service. It forms the last part of the Great Doxology and should be part of every Orthodox Christian’s morning and evening prayers. It is even sung in Greek and Latin on Holy Friday in the Roman Catholic Church, and forms part of their prayers for the dying. In our Orthodox tradition it is understood as a hymn to the Most Holy Trinity and so it is quite incorrect to put the word ‘and’ into the second and third phrases, as some English translations do.

Saint John of Damascus wrote a whole treatise explaining the meaning of the hymn, and his teaching is summed up in a hymn written by the Emperor Leo the Wise for the feast of Pentecost, which we still sing at Vespers on that day. ‘Come, you peoples, let us worship the Godhead in three persons, the Son in the Father, with the Holy Spirit. For the Father timelessly begot the Son, co-eternal and co-reigning, and the Holy Spirit was in the Father, glorified with the Son; one power, one essence, one Godhead, whom we all worship as we say: Holy God, who created all things through the Son, with the co-operation of the Holy Spirit. Holy Strong, through whom we have come to know the Father, and through whom the Holy Spirit came into the world. Holy Immortal, the Advocate Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son. Holy Trinity, glory to you!’

During the Trisagion the clergy should take their places behind the Holy Table at the *Synthronon*, that is the row of seats in the apse, either side of the Bishop’s throne, to listen to the readings. Sadly many modern church buildings do not have a throne or a synthronon behind the holy Table. A notable exception in London is the cathedral of Agia Sophia.

What people now think of as the Bishop’s throne next to the psalterion was originally his *stasidion*, or choir stall, where he stood for the offices, like Vespers and Matins. In monasteries it is still the Abbot’s stall, where he stands on great feasts. When Bishop celebrates the Trisagion is much elaborated, involving a solemn blessing of the people by the Bishop and leading into the chanting of the titles of the Patriarch and Bishop and wishing them ‘Many Years!’

During the Trisagion the Reader should come and receive the blessing of the celebrant to read the Apostle. He should then go to the centre of the church and face East to proclaim the Psalm and the Apostle. In the old days there were at least three readings at the Liturgy, from the Old Testament, the Apostle and the Gospel. Between the first two a Psalm was chanted with one verse repeated as a refrain. In the Orthodox Church today the first reading has disappeared and the psalm has been reduced to the refrain, known as the Prokeimenon, and a single verse of the Psalm. In the old days the Reader announced both the Tone to which the Prokeimenon should be sung and the number of the Psalm. It is good to see that the latest service books from Athens encourage the restoration of this custom.

After the prokeimenon the Reader declaims the Apostle from the centre of the church, the Priest or Deacon having first urged the people to pay attention, ‘Let us attend’. It is, after all, the word of God that is being proclaimed. In Orthodox tradition the readings from Scripture are always chanted, not simply read. This is for two reasons. The first is to make sure they are audible. In most of our churches there is no need for microphones. There were none in the churches of Constantinople in the days of the Emperor Justinian, and Agia Sophia is, to put it mildly, somewhat larger than most of our present buildings. The second reason is because the Reader is simply a transmitter, it is not up to him to put his own slant on the text, to put himself, as it were, between God and the listener. It is God’s word that we have come to hear, and not the reader’s, be he Bishop, Priest, Deacon or Layman. They are simply loud speakers, not the authors.

During the course of the year the Church reads the writings of the Apostles in the order in which they come in the New Testament. We start at Pascha with the Acts of Apostles, which tells how the Good News of the Resurrection travelled from Jerusalem to Rome itself, the centre of the Empire. After Pentecost we read from the Epistles of St Paul, more or less in order of length, then those of the other Apostles, St James, St Peter, St John and St Jude. This takes us to the beginning of Lent, during which we read the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Apocalypse of St John is never read liturgically.

After the Apostle the Reader should once again get the Priest’s blessing while the Singers begin the ‘Alleluia’. This should be properly sung, together with its accompanying verses, so that there is time to cense the Gospel book, the icons and the people and for the Deacon to make his way to the Ambo to chant the Gospel. The censing and the singing of the ‘Alleluia’ have been associated with the proclamation of the Gospel since very early days in both East and West. Censing during the chanting of the Apostle is not a good idea. If we have been told to ‘pay attention’, we want to be able to listen and not to be distracted by the rattling of chains and the tinkling of bells.

The solemn proclamation of the Gospel is the high point of the first part of the Liturgy. As Christ, the Word of God, explained the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, so he comes to us now in the words of the holy Gospel, which symbolises his presence among us. To hear the Gospel is an honour, a privilege. At Matins the priest says, ‘And that we may be counted worthy to listen to the holy Gospel, let us pray to the Lord God’. This is why we are invited to ‘stand upright’ and to ‘listen to’, or to ‘hear’, the Holy Gospel. In Greek the word to ‘hear’, *akouein*, is related to that for to ‘obey’, *ypakouein*. As Jesus says to the woman in the crowd, ‘Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it’. ‘Hearing’, ‘listening’, is one thing; doing something about it is another. Our immediate response, as so often in the Gospels themselves, is to give glory to God, ‘Glory to you, Lord! Glory to you!’. The priest blesses us with the holy Gospel, the icon and sign of Christ, the Incarnate Word, and replaces it on the holy Table.

The Gospel is not always easy to understand, nor is it always easy to put it into practice, and so, since the very earliest days of the Church, the reading of the Gospel has been followed by the sermon. In the earliest description we have of the Liturgy, written by St Justin the Martyr around 150 AD, we read, ‘And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has ceased, the President verbally instructs, and exhorts us to the imitation of these good things’. One can only conclude that the Orthodox Christians in the second century arrived for Liturgy somewhat earlier than their descendants of the twenty first.

**6.**

In his description of the Liturgy, with which we ended the previous part of this commentary, St Justin follows his description of the readings and the sermon with these words, ‘Then we all rise together and pray’. This prayer is still part of the Liturgy today, where it takes the form of a series of intercessions for the whole community. It is called the Litany of Fervent Supplication, or the Great Intercession, and was originally the main litany of the Liturgy. Unlike the opening Litany of Peace, the majority of its petitions are specific to the community that is celebrating the Liturgy and there is scope for adding the names of individuals, both living and departed. We also pray for those who work in the church and for the singers. The opening petition, ‘Let us all say, with all our soul and with all our mind, let us say’, and the three times repeated ‘Lord, have mercy’ give an idea of its importance. It is therefore much to be regretted that this litany, with all that follows up to the Cherubic Hymn, is effectively omitted in many Greek-speaking churches.

The Fervent Litany is followed by the Litany for the Catechumens, that is those who are preparing for Baptism. Today many people do not see the point of this litany, since few churches have adults under instruction. On the other hand, this litany reminds us that many, if not most, of the people among whom live have never heard the Gospel, the Good News of salvation. This litany should remind us that we have work to do, that we have Good News to proclaim, that there should always be catechumens in our churches being prepared for Baptism. All the ceremonies of Baptism suppose that the candidate is an adult.

The Church in the old days practised what is known as ‘The Discipline of the Secret’ and only those who had been baptised were allowed to be present during the Eucharist itself, the words of which were known only to them. St John Chrysostom will sometimes say things like ‘those who have been baptised will understand what I mean’ when he is preaching about the Eucharist. The baptised were, and still are, those who had been initiated into the mystery of Christianity. They are ‘initiates’, in Greek *Mystai*, and we still sometimes refer to the Liturgy as *Mystagogy.*. The Discipline of the Secret is no longer in force, but after the antimension has been opened there is still a symbolic dismissal of the Catechumens. This should remind us that the Eucharist, the ‘Mystical Supper’, is not something every day, but something supremely holy, that it is for those who have been ‘initiated’ by Baptism into the Mystery of the Faith.

During the Litany for the Catechumens the Priest places the Gospel book to one side of the holy Table and opens the Antimension. This is a cloth on which there is drawn an icon of the dead Christ at the foot of the cross. Frequently other people connected with this moment in the story of the Passion, the Mother of God, the Beloved Disciple, St Mary Magdalen, St Joseph of Arimatheia and St Nicodemos are also shown.

Antimensia are issued by the Patriarchs and heads of autocephalous Churches. At the dedication of a church the Altar, or Holy Table, [*400 words*] is consecrated by being anointed with the holy Myron. The bishop consecrates new antimensia by using them to wipes up the Myron. The bishop then signs them, adding the date and the name of the church where they were consecrated. He issues them to the various churches in his diocese and also to individual priests who may have to celebrate in places where there is no Orthodox altar with its own antimension.

The Liturgy must always be celebrated on an antimension, which is the sign that Liturgy is that of the whole Church, that the priest is in communion with the bishop and is authorised to celebrate in the name of the Church. In the very early days of the Church the Liturgy was often celebrated on the tombs of the Martyrs and it became the custom, which is still observed today in the Orthodox Church, to place relics in every consecrated altar. The antimension may also have small relics of the saints sewn into it. The word ‘antimension’ means ‘in place of the table’, because an antimension was originally used when no consecrated ‘holy table’ was available.

**The Liturgy of the Faithful.**

The second part of the Liturgy, sometimes called ‘The Liturgy of the Faithful’, or ‘Believers’, begins with two prayers ‘For the Believers’. The first is for the clergy and the second for the whole congregation. This is first prayer in the Liturgy to mention Holy Communion, ‘Give also to those who pray with us the grace of progress in right living, in faith and spiritual understanding. Grant that they may always worship you with fear and love, may partake of your holy mysteries without guilt or condemnation, and be counted worthy of your heavenly kingdom’. The main object of the Liturgy is that we should fulfil Christ’s command, ‘Take, eat’, ‘Drink from this all of you’.

Before the Liturgy proper can begin, the bread and wine must be brought to the altar. In the Great Church of Agia Sophia the bread and wine were prepared in a separate building and, because of what they will later become, they were brought to the Patriarch in the church in a solemn procession, known today as the Great Entrance. This is why when the Bishop celebrates he does not take part in the procession, but waits, standing in the Holy Door, to receive the gifts as they are brought to him by the assistant clergy. As the clergy prepare for the Great Entrance the singers chant, ‘We, who in a mystery represent the Cherubim and sing the thrice‑holy hymn to the life‑giving Trinity, let us now lay aside every care of this life. For we are about to receive the King of all, invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts. Alleluia!’ This solemn chant is called the *Cherouvikon*, or Hymn of the Cherubim, and indicates that the Liturgy is, at it were, changing into a higher gear. In the Old Testament the Prophet Isaias entered the Temple and saw a vision of God in glory on his high throne accompanied the fiery Seraphim singing the thrice-holy hymn, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’. At this moment we too stand before God’s glory and are caught up into the worship of the angelic Powers. For a short while we are to put aside all our worries and problems and give ourselves wholly to the adoration of God, our Creator and Redeemer. The Psalmist tells us, ‘Cast your care upon the LORD, and he will support you’. In the Gospel Jesus says to Martha, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worrying and fretting about many things. Only one thing is needed’. At this moment of the Liturgy we are to be Mary, who sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his words, rather than Martha.

The bread and wine that are being brought to the altar will become the Body and Blood of the King of glory, the King whose Kingdom is not of this world, as he said to Pilate, and so the clergy, as they pass through the congregation, pray that the Lord God will ‘remember you all in his Kingdom’. These words remind us of the prayer of the Thief on the cross, ‘Remember me, Lord, when you come in your Kingdom’. The Cross stands at the heart of the Liturgy. Golgotha stands at the entrance to the Kingdom.

The bread and wine have been placed on the altar and everything is almost ready for the great Prayer of Thanksgiving and the Mystical Supper of holy Communion, but there are still two acts of preparation to perform. The first is to symbolise our reconciliation with our fellows and the second is to proclaim our faith.

**The Kiss of Peace.**

In his first Letter St John writes, ‘Anyone who says “I love God” but hates his brother, is a liar, since whoever does not love the brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen. And we have this commandment from him, that whoever loves God, must also love his brother.’ It is no good imagining that we can keep the first great commandment, to love God, if we do not keep the second, to love our fellow human beings. Jesus himself, in the Sermon on the Mount, links bringing offerings to God with brotherly love when he says, ‘If you bring your gift to the altar, and you remember there that your brother has something against you, leave your gift right there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift’.

This is why since very early times the Liturgy has included a Kiss of Peace. In the present Orthodox Liturgy only the celebrating clergy actually exchange the kiss, with the words, ‘Christ is in our midst’, and the reply. ‘He is and shall be’. Many western Churches have restored this giving of the peace to the whole congregation, though it is usually reduced to a simple handshake. There are some Orthodox who think it would be a good idea to reintroduce the Kiss of Peace in our congregations too. Whether this is done or not, the invitation, ‘Let us love one another’ is addressed to the everyone in the church and so we are clearly reminded of the need for mutual love and reconciliation before the most solemn part of the Liturgy begins. In addition the Orthodox Liturgy links the kiss of peace with the profession of faith, the Creed. We are invited to ‘love one another, so that with one mind we may confess…’, and we answer ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Trinity consubstantial and undivided’. Simply to **say** the words of the Creed together is not enough, we must say them with ‘one mind’, as loving members of the one body of Christ. Only then shall we be ready to take part in the great Mystery of the Faith, the Mystical Supper of the Body and Blood of Our Lord and Saviour.

**7. The Creed – the Profession of Faith.**

Originally the Creed, the public profession of faith, was, as it still is, part of the mystery of Baptism. During Lent the candidates ‘preparing for enlightenment’ received their final intensive preparation for baptism, which took place on Holy Saturday during the reading of the Old Testament prophecies. In order to understand our present way of doing things it may be helpful to say a little about the history of the opening ceremonies of Baptism.

**Baptism – Making a Catechumen.**

These ceremonies all presuppose that the candidate is an adult, who will have been under instruction for a number of years. It was quite common in the early Church even for people from Christian families to wait until they were thirty years old, the age of Our Lord at his baptism, before being baptised. The candidate will have a Sponsor, or Godparent, who will have to testify to the Bishop that the candidate is leading a moral life and is worthy of Baptism. Baptisms normally took place at Pascha, during the great vigil on Holy Saturday night. This is the service that we now celebrate on Holy Saturday morning.

In our present books the beginning of the ceremonies of Baptism have the title, ‘The Making of a Catechumen’. This really only describes the first prayer of the ceremony. The exorcisms that follow are those that were given to the catechumens during Lent when they received their final instructions in the Faith. What follows is a description of the ceremonies in the Great Church in Constantinople over a thousand years ago. At midday on Good Friday, the candidates are brought to the Patriarch in the Great Church. He instructs the catechumens to undress and remove their shoes and then explains the importance of what is to take place. He begins, ‘The end of your instruction has arrived: the moment of your redemption. Today you are about to present Christ with your contract of faith. Paper, ink and pen are conscience, tongue and behaviour. Take care then how you write your confession’. The candidates are to renounce the devil and commit their lives to Christ for ever. The Patriarch explains why the candidates are to turn to the west to renounce Satan, ‘The devil is now standing in the west, grinding his teeth, tearing his hair, wringing his hands, biting his lips, crazed, bewailing his loneliness, not believing in your liberation. And therefore Christ sets you before him, so that, having renounced him and blown on him, you may take up the war against him. The devil stands in the west, where darkness begins. Renounce him and blow on him, then turn to the east and commit yourself to Christ’.

Then follow the renunciation of Satan and the commitment to Christ, during which the Patriarch entrusts them with the Creed. In this old rite it is the Patriarch who first says the Creed and the candidates repeat it after him. This is done three times. It is the *Paradosis*, the Tradition, the ‘handing on’ of the Faith. We do not invent the faith for ourselves, we receive what has been handed down from Christ through the Apostles, and we, in our turn, hand it on to those who come after us. St Paul insists on this in his first letter to the Corinthians. Writing about the Lord’s Supper he says, ‘I received from the Lord what I also handed over to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread’. Later in the same letter he writes, ‘For I handed over to you in the first place what I received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with scriptures and that he was buried and that he rose on the third day in accordance with the scriptures’. Already in St Paul we find phrases that will be incorporated into the Creed that we say today.

In the earliest rites we have this profession of the faith took the form of questions that the priest asked the candidate before each of the three immersions. Here is one early description of baptism. ‘When each person to be baptized has gone down into the water, the one baptizing shall lay hands on each of them, asking, “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?” And the one being baptized shall answer, “I believe.” He shall then baptize each of them once, laying his hand on the head of each one. Then he shall ask, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the living and the dead?” When each has answered, “I believe,” he shall baptize a second time. Then he shall ask, “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?” Then each being baptized shall answer, “I believe.” And thus let him baptize the third time.’

From this description it is easy to see that the basic Christian profession of faith is threefold. We ‘confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Trinity consubstantial and undivided’, as we sing just before the Creed in the Liturgy. Some books divide the Creed into twelve ‘articles’, one for each of the Apostles, but this is not strictly correct. We are not asked if we believe in, say, the resurrection, but ‘in Jesus Christ, who, among other things, rose from the dead’.

Until the First Council of Nicea in 325 the various churches had their own formulas for use at baptisms. One such formula is an old Roman one, known as the Apostles’ Creed, and which is still used in many western churches alongside the only universal Creed, the Creed of Nicea as proclaimed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 and confirmed at Chalcedon in 451. The Fathers of the Councils proclaimed the Creed together and began, ‘We believe’, but in the Liturgy we keep the old baptismal form, ‘I believe’, to remind us of our baptism and of our solemn commitment to Christ, a commitment that we must renew day by day.

During the fourth and fifth centuries there were many debates and controversies about the faith, about the Holy Trinity and the person of Our Lord, and this led some churches in the East to introduce the practice of proclaiming the Creed during the Liturgy. This was introduced in Constantinople in about 518. In Rome it was only introduced in 1014. Why is the Creed proclaimed at this particular moment in the service? The most likely reason is that it was felt that it should be said until the catechumens had been dismissed. It was only after they had been baptised that they would allowed to proclaim the Creed in public alongside their Christian brothers and sisters, with whom they had just exchanged the Kiss of Peace.

Finally here are one or two remarks on particular words and phrases in the official translation of the Archdiocese. At the First Council of Nicea the Fathers defined that the Son was not inferior to the Father, that his ‘being’, ‘essence’, or ‘substance’; that he was as much ‘God’ as the Father. They expressed this by using a word not found in the Bible, *homoousios*, because the heretics managed to twist all the words in the Gospel to make Christ inferior to the Father. There is an amusing account by St Athanasios of the Council of Nicea in which he says that every time the Orthodox suggested a suitable word from the Bible, the heretics got into a huddle and came up with a heretical way of understanding it. So finally the Orthodox proposed a word which, though not in the Bible, would express the true faith. The word *homoousios* means ‘of the same essence’, of the same being’, but it is not an explanation. We can never understand the supreme mystery of God, the Holy Trinity. The word is really a sort of marker. If you are prepared to say that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, then you are Orthodox; if not you are not. The earliest Latin translations used the word ‘consubstantial’. We decided to keep this to underline the fact that we cannot have an ‘explanation’ of the Trinity.

‘For our sake …….he became man’. The more important point here is the second part. Many English versions have ‘and was made man’. This is a mistranslation of the Latin and misrepresents the Greek, which means ‘he became a human being’.

‘He is coming again’. Most English versions have the future ‘He will come again’. The Greek has a present, ‘coming’. The Lord’s coming is not something in the remote future. It is always immediate, always imminent. One could even say it is always a threat, since our Lord himself compares it to a burglar who comes unexpectedly night.

‘Together glorified’. Most English versions simply have ‘glorified’. But the Greek word *syndoxasmenon* is very uncommon and was used by the Fathers to underline our belief that the Holy Spirit is as truly God as the Father and the Son.

Now that we have proclaimed our Faith in the Most Holy Trinity we are ready to begin the most solemn part of the Liturgy, the great prayer of thanksgiving and the Mystical Supper of the Body and Blood of Our Lord and Saviour.

**8. The Eucharistic Prayer: Part One.**

After the proclamation of the Creed by the whole Assembly, we begin the most solemn part of the Liturgy, the great prayer of thanksgiving, at the heart of which we obey the command that Our Lord gave us at the Last Supper, to take bread and wine and to eat and drink them in remembrance of what he did for us in his Passion, Death and Resurrection; to take bread and wine which will become by the power of the Holy Spirit his Body and Blood.

The Prayer goes back originally to the prayers of blessing which were used in the time of Our Lord and are still said by our Jewish brothers and sisters over bread and wine. In the Gospel we read how Jesus, when he was about to feed the five thousand, ‘took the loaves and, when he had given thanks (εὐχαρίστησε), he distributed them to the disciples’.

In the story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus on the first Easter day, as told by St Luke, we read that, ‘As he was sitting with them at table, he took the bread, said the blessing (εὐλόγησε), broke it and gave it to them’.

At important moments of the Liturgy, and at other services, the Deacon, or Priest invites the people to pay attention, ‘Wisdom! Stand upright!’, ‘Let us attend!’ Before the Great Prayer the invitation is especially solemn, ‘Let us stand with awe. Let stand with fear. Let us attend, that we may offer the holy oblation in peace’. It is not only the Priest who offers the holy oblation; it is the whole congregation who offers with the Priest. The whole Prayer concerns us, ‘We thank you’, ‘We cry aloud and say’ and so on. It is we who must ‘offer the holy oblation in peace’. Once again we are reminded that peace and love are absolutely necessary if we are truly to take part in the mystery of God’s love for us. So we reply, ‘Mercy and peace: a sacrifice of praise’. Our offering is to show mercy and love. This is our sacrifice. In the Old Testament God tells us plainly, ‘It is mercy I want, not sacrifice; knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings’. The Prophet Isaias puts the matter very clearly at the very beginning of his prophecy. He tells the people that ‘The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel does not know me, and the people has not understood me.’ This is where the ox and the ass that we see in the icon of the Nativity come from. They are not there as just Christmas decorations, but to ask us a serious question, ‘Do **you** know your Master? Have **you** understood who I am?’

The prophet goes on to remind us that true religion is about ‘mercy and peace’ justice and love of our fellow human beings, not simply splendid services. As we begin the solemn Prayer of Thanksgiving let us pay attention to his warning, ‘What do I care for the number of your sacrifices? says the Lord. I have had enough of whole-burnt rams and fat of fatlings. I take no pleasure in the blood of calves, lambs and goats. When you come in to visit me, who asks these things of you? Trample my courts no more! Bring no more worthless offerings; your incense is loathsome to me. New moon and sabbath, calling of assemblies, octaves with wickedness: I cannot bear them. I detest your new moons and festivals; they weigh me down, I am tired of the load. When you spread out your hands, I close my eyes to you. Though you pray even more, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood! Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; stop doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan’s plea, defend the widow.’ Try replacing some of this list with ‘Artoklasies’, ‘Mnimosuna’, ‘Paraclesies’. What really matters is what is in our hearts. That is what God looks at, not the mere outward performance.

Next follows a solemn dialogue between the Priest and People. First the Priest greets the People with the closing words of St Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.’ All that we do, above all the divine Liturgy, we do in the name of the most holy Trinity. We answer, ‘And with your spirit’, the Spirit that dwells in every baptised Christian, but also, as St John Chrysostom points out, the Spirit by whose power the bread and wine will become the Body and Blood of Christ.

**9. The Eucharistic Prayer: Part Two.**

After the opening blessing the celebrant invites us to join with him in the great Prayer of Thanksgiving in a dialogue that goes back to the earliest days of the Church, and is still found in the liturgies of both East and West. In the Cherubic Hymn we sang, ‘Let us now lay aside every care of this life’, now we are told to ‘have our hearts on high’, that is, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. St Cyril of Jerusalem, talking to the newly baptised, says, ‘After this the priest cries, “On high the hearts”. Truly at that most fearsome moment one must have the heart with the Lord, and not below close to earth and earthly affairs’. St Nicolas Cavasilas makes the same point in his commentary on the liturgy, ‘Having given them this blessing and thus raised their souls from the earth, the priest lifts up their thoughts and says, “Let our hearts be on high”, “Let us think on the things on high, not those on earth”. And they give their assent and say that they have their hearts “there where our treasure is”, where Christ is enthroned at the right hand of the Father, “We have them with the Lord”’. In the West St Augustine is equally clear, ‘After the greeting that you know, that is, “The Lord be with you”, you hear, “Heart on high”. The whole life of true Christians is “heart on high”, not that of Christians in name only, but of Christians in reality and truth. Their whole life is “heart on high”. What then is “heart on high”? It is hope in God, not in yourself, for you are below, God is on high. If your hope is in yourself, your heart is below, it is not on high. And so, when you have heard from the priest, “Heart on high”, you answer, “We have [it] with the Lord”. Make sure that you make a true answer.’

Then the priest asks us to give thanks, ‘Let us give thanks –*Εὐχαριστήσωμεν* – to the Lord’. Here we reach the heart of the Liturgy.The word ‘Thanksgiving’, ‘Eucharist’, has become one of the names that we use for the whole Liturgy. If we have been saved, if God himself has become one of us, has died for us and raised us with himself from the power of sin and death, then our first duty is to be grateful, to thank him for all that he has done for us, for all that we have and are. And so we reply, ‘It is right and fitting’.

The priest now begins the great prayer of Thanksgiving, the great prayer of Offering, in Greek *Anaphora*, by taking up our reply and developing it by reminding us of some of the many things for which we should give praise and thanks to God. We thank God for creating us and raising us up again when we had fallen and making us heirs of the Kingdom of heaven. The first part of the prayer reaches its climax with us joining in the hymn of victory and thanksgiving that the choirs of heaven sing unceasingly before the throne of God. ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!’

The first part of this hymn is taken from the Prophet Isaias. One day, when he entered the Temple in Jerusalem, he was granted a vision of God. He describes his vision like this: ‘In the year in which king Ozias died, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, and the house was full of his glory. And Seraphim stood round about him. Each one had six wings: and with two they covered theirface, and with two they covered theirfeet, and with two they flew. And they were crying to one another, and saying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory”.’ At the sight of the glory and holiness of God Isaias is overcome with his awareness of his own unworthiness and uncleanness. As we join in the angels’ sing, we should be aware of our unworthiness, but also of what a privilege it is to be allowed to join the chorus of praise. Later in on in the course of the Liturgy we shall meet Isaias and his vision again.

The second part of the hymn is taken from the Gospel of St Matthew, where the crowds on Palm Sunday welcome Jesus, as he rides into Jerusalem, with words from Psalm 117. We too are about to receive Christ, not simply into the holy city, but into ourselves in holy Communion. The crowds in the Gospel were fickle, and by Friday had turned against Jesus and were shouting for his death. It is worth remembering this as we sing our song of welcome. The Gospel, and the Liturgy keeps the Hebrew word ‘Hosanna!’, which we usually feel to be a shout of joy, but in the Psalms we find the meaning, ‘Save us now!’

In the early days of the Church, of course, the people would have been able to hear whole prayer, as it was said out loud, but over time it came to be said so quietly, *mystikos* in Greek, that it was in effect silent. This meant that the singers used ever more elaborate melodies to ‘cover’ what the priest was saying silently. They even added words to the people’s reply ‘It is right and fitting’. This addition is still used in some churches, in particular in Russia and on the Holy Mountain. Where the prayer is said aloud both this reply and the ‘Holy, holy, holy’ should be sung to short and simple melodies in which the people can join. The prayer is a dialogue between the celebrant and the people, not a duet between priest and singers.

**10. The Eucharistic Prayer: Part Three.**

The opening part of the Eucharistic Prayer is a brief summary of the story of creation and salvation, a story that is told in greater detail in the corresponding part of the Liturgy of St Basil. After the people have joined the Seraphim in singing, and indeed ‘shouting’, ‘the triumphal hymn’, ‘Holy, holy, holy’, the prayer now focuses on how and why God, the All-Holy, brought about our salvation.

The prayer takes as its starting point the wonderful words from St John’s Gospel, ‘This is how God loved the world: he gave his only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life’. This is the natural meaning of the Greek, as well as of the ancient translations in Latin, Syriac and Coptic, but most English versions have something like, ‘God so loved the world’, which people usually take to mean ‘so much’, but this slightly misses the point. We do not know God’s nature. God is, as the opening of the prayer says, ‘ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable’. God is known to us by his acts, by what he does, and what St John is saying to us is, ‘If you want to know what God is like, look at what he does’. “God”, as I say in my First Letter, “is love”. And what does this mean? Do you want to know what God’s love is like? I’ll tell you, “This is how God loved the world”, he gave the most precious thing he had, his only Son’. Just as in the Old Testament God had asked Abraham to give him the most precious thing he had, his beloved, only son Isaac, and to slay him in sacrifice, so he himself gives his own beloved, only Son to be offered up, in the words of the Proskomide, to be ‘sacrificed for the life and salvation of the world’.

And so we reach the heart of the great prayer and the heart of the divine liturgy as we recall the Mystical Supper, the prelude to the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord. But we do more than simply remember these events, we ourselves truly take part in them ‘mystically’, or, as the Cherubic Hymn puts it, ‘in a mystery’. Just before Communion we shall say the prayer which begins, ‘Of your mystical Supper, Son of God, receive me **today**as a communicant’, and we believe that, by the power of God’s Spirit, the gifts of bread and wine that we have placed on the holy Table become the Body and Blood of Our Lord.

The priest relates what happened at the Last Supper in words that go back to the very earliest days of the Church, even before the Gospels were written. The earliest account that we have is the one given us by St Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, written only about twenty years after the Crucifixion. Here is what he writes, ‘For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “Take eat. This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the Lord’s cup unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord’. St Paul plays on the meaning of the Greek word παραδίδοναι [*paradidonai*], which means ‘hand over’, ‘hand on’, and hence also, but not very commonly, ‘betray’. ‘Tradition’ in Greek is παράδοσις [*paradosis*]. The usual words for ‘betray’ and ‘betrayer’ are προδίδοναι [*prodidonai*] and προδότης [*prodotes*], a word used of Judas in the texts of Holy Week, but not in the Gospels. There is no word παραδότης [*paradotes*] in Greek.

The text of the Liturgy has filled out the biblical texts of this account. In the first place, it adds ‘or rather gave himself up’, in order to underline that Our Lord goes willingly to his death. If his Father showed how he loved the world by sending his only Son, the Son shows how he loves the world by giving himself up to death. As Shakespeare didn’t say, ‘Love is not love, when it is not prepared to die for the beloved’. That is also the calling of the Christian, who is to ‘be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’.

Secondly, it adds that Our Lord took the bread ‘into his most pure and unblemished hands’. The Greek for ‘unblemished’ is ἀμωμήτοις [*amometois*], which also means ‘blameless’, like its synonym ἄμωμος [*amomos*]. This is the word used throughout the Old Testament to describe animals that are acceptable for sacrifice. They must be perfect, without spot or blemish. In the Proskomide, as the priest makes the second cut into the prosphora, he quotes from the prophet Isaias the words, ‘And as an unblemished [*amomos*] lamb before its shearer is dumb’. By using this word, which is not in Isaias here, we are reminded, in the words of the prayer before the Cherubic Hymn, that Christ is the one ‘who offers and is offered, who receives and is distributed’.

Finally all accounts of the Last Supper in the New Testament say either that Our Lord ‘gave thanks’, or that he ‘blessed’ the bread. The traditional Jewish blessing over bread is, ‘Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from earth’. The blessing our Lord would have used was probably very similar. The first Eucharist then began with ‘thanksgiving’, or εὐχαριστία.

**11. The Eucharistic Prayer: Part Four.**

On 26 March 565 the Emperor Justinian, who fancied himself as a theologian, issued a decree in which he ordered the clergy to say the prayers of the Liturgy aloud, so that the people could hear what was being said.

As few people have access to the eight hundred pages of Justinian’s Novellae, or Decrees, here is a translation of the relevant part of Novella 137, ‘Moreover we order the bishops and presbyters not to say the divine Oblation and the prayer in holy Baptism silently, but in a voice that can be heard by the faithful people, so that the souls of those who listen may be roused to greater compunction and to glorify God our Master. For this is what the holy Apostle teaches when he says in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, “Otherwise, if you pronounce a blessing with the spirit, how shall one who holds the place of the uninstructed say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks very well, but the other person is not built up.” [*1 Corinthians 14:16-17*]. Again, this is what he says in the Epistle to the Romans, “For it is by believing with the heart that one is justified, and by confessing with the mouth that one is saved” [*Romans 10:10*]. For these reasons, then, it is proper that the prayer of the Offering and the other prayers to our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, with the Father and the Holy Spirit should be said aloud by the most reverend bishops and presbyters. As the very reverend priests know that if they disregard any of this, they will answer for it too at the fearful judgement of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, we too will not acquiesce in this, or leave it unpunished.’

In his preface to this Novella Justinian even goes so far as to say that, quite apart from not living in accordance with the canons, there are clergy, and this seems to include bishops, who do not know the prayer of ‘the holy Oblation and Baptism’. Justinian’s edict never seems to have widely observed in the Orthodox world in general. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that originally all the prayers of the services, including the divine Liturgy, would have been heard by the congregation.

St John Chrysostom seems to assume that the baptised will know the words of the Liturgy, for in his sermons he will say things like, ‘Those of you who have been baptised will know what I am talking about’, when he is preaching about the words of the eucharistic prayer. This suggests that the prayers were still being said aloud in his day. The practice of saying the priest’s prayers silently (notice that Justinian says nothing about deacons) seems to have started in the Syrian churches in the East, following an increasing sense of awe and reverence at the mystery, something that is much emphasised by St John Chrysostom, who himself came from Antioch in Syria. It is also around this time, the late fourth century, that some churches began using curtains to hide the altar at the solemn parts of the service and building up the low barriers in front of it into what has become the modern Templon, or iconostasis. In some churches, particularly in Russia, this sometimes becomes a solid wall separating the main body of the church from the altar.

Another factor influencing these developments was the idea that the Christian church building was symbolically like the Temple of the Old Testament, in which the Holy of Holies was shut off from the everyone by a great curtain and into which only the High Priest could enter, and then only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

We still call the bishop ‘High Priest’ (Ἀρχιερεύς), and deacons are sometimes compared to the Levites. It is also worth remembering that in the New Testament, apart from Jewish and pagans priests, the word priest (ἱερεύς) is only used of Jesus himself, not of not of any of his disciples.

Even when the priest’s prayers of the Liturgy were not said audibly, the Christ’s words at the Last Supper were always chanted aloud, as they still are, because these words are not a prayer or a statement, but a command addressed to the whole congregation. At the heart his’ ‘last will and testament’, as we might call it, Our Lord tells to us to do something. We are to ‘Take, eat’, and to ‘Drink from this, all of you’. To each of these commands the people give their assent, ‘Amen’. ‘Amen’ is a Hebrew word which means ‘Surely’, ‘So be it’. In the Greek Old Testament it is frequently translated γένοιτο, which is word used by the Mother of God at the Annunciation. We give our ‘Amen’ to God through Christ, as God gives his ‘Yes’ to us through Christ. As St Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians, ‘For in [Christ] is found the ‘Yes’ to all God’s promises, and therefore it is in him that we answer ‘Amen’ to the glory of God’ [*2.Corinthians 1:20*]. This meal, this eating and drinking, is to be ‘in memory’ of Christ, as the account of the Last Supper in St Luke’s Gospel and St Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians tells, though not that in the Gospels according to St Matthew and St Mark. This difference is reflected in the Liturgies of St Basil and John Chrysostom, St Basil reflecting the former and St John Chrysostom the latter.

Nevertheless St John Chrysostom makes it clear that the Eucharist is ‘in memory’ of Our Lord and all that he has done for us, since he follows Christ’s words with, ‘Remembering therefore this our Saviour’s command…’ At this point St Basil quotes the words of St Paul almost word for word, ‘Do this in memory of me; for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim my death’ [*1 Cor. 11:25-26*].

**12. The Eucharistic Prayer: Part Five.**

The Liturgy is not only a memorial of the Last Supper, but of the whole of our redemption, and so, after we have recalled our Lord’s command to ‘Take eat’ and to ‘Drink from this’, and his solemn declaration that this bread and wine are his Body and Blood, the Prayer continues by recalling the other events which accomplish our salvation. It is important to grasp the structure of this part of the Prayer. In order to bring this out, here is a slightly paraphrased translation,

*‘And so, as we remember this command of our Saviour and everything that has been done for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Sitting at the right hand, the second and glorious Coming again; and as we offer you what is yours from what is already yours, in all things and for all things we praise you, we bless you, we give thanks to you, O Lord. And we pray to you our God’.*

Grammatically this is all one sentence, but in the Liturgy the priest only says the words as far as ‘in all things and for all things’. It is the people who sing, ‘We praise you, we bless you’. The main verb of the sentence, as Professor Trembelas pointed out many years ago, is given to the people, just as earlier the priest introduces the people’s hymn, ‘Holy, holy, holy’ with the words ‘singing, crying, shouting the triumphal hymn and saying’. The people’s words ‘We praise you, we bless you…’ are not meant to be a pious meditation, sung to a long, drawn out melody to ‘cover’ the solemn invocation of the Holy Spirit, but rather they are a joyful affirmation of praise and thanksgiving to God for ‘all that has been done for us’.

For various reasons the structure of this part of the Liturgy has been misunderstood in many places, so much so that in some churches in the United States the people’s hymn is now sung **after** the Invocation (*Epiclesis*) of the Holy Spirit! One reason the true structure has been misunderstood is that most modern Greek texts of the Liturgy do not say ‘Offering you’, but ‘We offer you your own from your own in all things and for all things’ full stop. In this way the people’s response becomes a ‘stand alone’ hymn, and no longer part of a dialogue with the celebrant. Another reason is that some translators and commentators understand the Greek *panta* as masculine and give the meaning as ‘on behalf of all’ or ‘for all’. In fact the Greek is neuter plural and so, in English, the word ‘things’ must be added to make the meaning clear.

All this may seem very fussy and complicated, but in fact it has practical implications for the actual celebration of the Liturgy. The priest when he sings the words ‘in all things and for all things’ must do so in such a way that the people can at once give their response. He must not chant them so that his words form a self-contained whole. Musical settings for the people’s response should be simple, not elaborate and drawn out. As Professor Trembelas says, the next words of the priest, which introduce the Invocation of the Spirit, follow on naturally from the people’s response.

*People: We praise you, we bless you, we give thanks to you, O Lord, and***we pray***to you, our God.*

*Priest: Also we offer you this spiritual worship, without shedding of blood, and****we****ask,****pray****and implore you: send down your Holy Spirit upon us, and upon these gifts here set forth.*

Once again it is most important to stress that the Liturgy is an action by both priest and people; it is not a spectator sport, with the clergy and servers as the players and the congregation as the supporters in the stands. The words which introduce the Invocation make this point. They do not ask God to send the Holy Spirit only upon the gifts, but, and it comes first, ‘upon us’, that is the priest and people.

Here again it is important to understand the structure of the prayer, and so we give a translation following the grammar of the Greek, without all the later interventions of the deacon.

*Priest: … send down your Holy Spirit upon us, and upon these gifts here set forth, and make this bread the precious Body of your Christ, and what is in this Cup the precious Blood of your Christ, changing them by your Holy Spirit,****so that****those who partake of them may obtain vigilance of soul, forgiveness of sins, communion of your Holy Spirit, fulness of the Kingdom of heaven, freedom to speak in your presence, not judgement or condemnation.*

The Liturgy is the Mystical Supper of the Lord and the reason for the consecration is ‘so that’ we may take part in that Supper by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, not simply to have Christ present among us in the consecrated bread and wine. Communion is an integral part of the divine Liturgy, not simply an optional extra for the especially devout.

**13. The Eucharistic Prayer: Part Six.**

At the Last Supper Our Lord took bread, blessed it, broke it and said ‘Take eat. This is my Body’. The Orthodox Church believes that he meant what he said. Ever since the earliest days of the Church the Fathers insist that in Communion we receive not mere symbols, but the Body and Blood of Christ in the forms of bread and wine. Around the year 100, the great martyr, St Ignatios of Antioch, whom we call the ‘Godbearer’, wrote in his letter to the Romans, ‘I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was descended from David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible’. Theodore of Mopsuestia, a friend and fellow-student of St John Chrysostom, makes the point clearly, ‘When our Lord gave the bread he did not say, ‘This is the symbol of my body,’ but, ‘This is my body.’ In the same way, when he gave the cup of his blood he did not say, ‘This is the symbol of my blood,’ but, ‘This is my blood’; for he wanted us to look upon the bread and wine, after they had received grace and the coming of the Holy Spirit, not according to their nature, but to receive them as they are, the body and blood of our Lord. We should not think of them merely as bread and wine, but as the body and blood of the Lord, into which they have been transformed by the descent of the Holy Spirit’. St John Chrysostom himself puts it like this in his commentary on St Matthew’s gospel, ‘many people nowadays say,   “I wish I could see his shape, his appearance, his clothes, his sandals.” Only look! You see him! You touch him! You eat him!’. We see him by faith, we see him with the eyes of the mind. As St John Chrysostom puts it, ‘Our Lord hands over to you in tangible things that which is perceived by the mind’.

This is not to say that there have never been problems. Already St Ignatios knows of people who do not believe that the bread and wine become truly the Body and Blood of Christ. In his letter to the church of Smyrna he writes, ‘There are some people who abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in his good-pleasure, raised from the dead’. In the West, particularly at the time of the Reformation, there was much controversy between Catholics and Protestants about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This has not been the case among the Orthodox, who have always that in the Mystery of the holy Eucharist the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood by the power of the Holy Spirit. As we say in one of the prayers before Communion, ‘I believe, that this indeed your most pure Body, and that this is indeed your precious Blood’. The Orthodox could well make their own the answer that Queen Elizabeth I gave when she was asked her opinion on Christ’s presence in the Eucharist,

‘He was the Word that spake it,
He took the Bread and brake it,
And what that word did make it,
That I believe, and take it.

Every Liturgy is the liturgy of the whole Church, and the Church is the assembly – which is what the Greek word Ἐκκλησία means – of the all the members of the Body of Christ in every place and of every time. It is the sacrifice the Christ offered on Calvary made present here and now. In the Liturgy of St Basil at the moment of the Invocation we have the words, ‘this cup the precious blood of our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, poured out for the life of the world’. And so we now associate all the Saints and all the departed with our local Liturgy. Every human being is saved by the Blood of Christ and so we can say that ‘we offer this spiritual worship for those who have gone to their in faith, Forefathers, Fathers, Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Preachers, Apostles, Evangelists, Martyrs, Confessors, Ascetics and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith; above all for our most holy, pure, most blessed and glorious Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary’.

Remembrance is a very import idea in Orthodoxy. The Liturgy itself is in memory of Our Lord, as we obey his command to ‘Do this in memory of me’. One of our favourite prayers and one which say just before Communion is that of the Good Thief, ‘Remember me, Lord, when you come in your Kingdom’. At funerals and memorial services the final prayer is always ‘Everlasting Memory’. And so at the most solemn part of the Liturgy we remember the living and the departed, and the priest and deacon now begin the reading of the Diptychs, that is the list names of the departed and the living, including the bishops, clergy and monastics, the whole church and the civil rulers. The word ‘diptych’ means ‘folded’, or ‘doubled’, and refers to the folded writing tablet on which the names were written. Originally the diptychs of the departed were introduced by the priest with the words, ‘Above all for our most pure Lady…’. The clergy would say the hymn to the Mother of God, ‘It is truly right to call you blessed’, quietly while the names of the departed were read out. This is explains why there is a censing at this point, as censing regularly takes place at commemorations the departed. Later on the reading of the names was dropped and the singers took over the hymn to the Mother of God. On great feasts the irmos of the ninth ode of the Canon of the feast is sung instead. The singing of the hymn to the Mother of God has had the unfortunate result that the rest of the prayer has, in effect, become detached from what comes before and that most people are almost unaware of the way in which the Church at this most solemn moment remembers before God all the living and all the departed.

Then follow the diptychs of the living, indicated by the priest’s chanting that for the bishop. In the old days the deacon would then read the names of the living, ending with the words, ‘And each and all’. The Greek means literally ‘And all [male] and all [female]’, but this is impossible in English! The older books still say that the deacon reads the diptychs of the living, but this is no longer done.

The great prayer of thanksgiving ends with a short series of ‘remembrances’, not unlike the petitions of the litanies, but which includes a remembrance of the poor. This reminds us that the Liturgy is not just about ourselves, reminds us that there are two great commandments, to love God and to love our fellow human beings. St John Chrysostom often ends his sermons by reminding his congregation that if they want to find Christ they will find him in the beggars that sit asking for alms outside the doors of the church.

In the Liturgy of Saint Basil this list of remembrances is very long and even includes a petition to God to remember the people we may have forgotten, ‘And those whom we have not remembered, through ignorance or forgetfulness or the number of the names, do you yourself remember, O God, who know the age and appellation of each, who know each from their mother’s womb’.

And so we come to the concluding doxology, with its insistence on the importance of unity, and that we are to come forward to share in the one Cup, ‘And grant that with one voice and one heart we may glorify and praise your all-honoured and majestic name, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever, and to the ages of ages.

The people give their assent to all that has gone before, to the whole of the great prayer of thanksgiving, by their, ‘Amen’. This is very ancient and is described by St Justin, the Martyr, in about 155 AD, ‘when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying “Amen”; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons’. St Justin is writing for pagans and so tries to avoid technical Christian vocabulary. It is a pity that today this great ‘Amen’ is scarcely noticed. It should, ideally, be chanted by the whole congregation, and with emphasis.

Finally the priest solemnly blesses the people, who answer ‘And with your spirit’. There are only two places where this is the people’s reply. One is at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer and the other is here, at the end. On all other occasions they simply say, ‘And to your spirit’. The great prayer is framed by these two solemn greetings and responses.

1. From the website of the parish of [St Anthony the Great and St John the Baptist in Islington (London)](https://orthodox-islington.org.uk/the-divine-liturgy-2/), where Fr Ephrem served in his latter years: <https://www.orthodox-islington.org.uk/the-divine-liturgy-2/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)