

THE NECESSITY OF THE FAITHFUL TO PREPARE FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE DIVINE LITURGY

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In our series of Sermons on the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist, we have tried in simple terms to explain the Lord's words and actions at the Last Supper, when He delivered this Great Mystery to the Disciples before His arrest. We have focused only on the relevant words of the Lord, as quoted by the Holy Gospels and the Apostle Paul. I hope that all of our listeners have understood that out of great love for His Disciples, the Lord established the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist, so that He is not only in communion with the faithful, but also totally united with them. A union enacted through the very Holy Body and Blood of Christ!

Out of all the Holy Services of the Church, none can compare to the Divine Liturgy, where our Lord Jesus Christ Himself offers Himself as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, and the salvation of all people. In Holy Communion, He is essentially united with every believer who approaches. This is why it is vital for Orthodox Christians to participate in the Divine Liturgy with faith, reverence, and a sincere love for God (as well as those close to Him). In order for this conscious participation to happen, there needs to be understanding of the words of the Divine Liturgy, as well as the deeper spiritual meaning behind everything that happens during the Liturgy. This is necessary, because even the simplest Christian who comes for the Divine Liturgy is not just a mere spectator, passively watching what is happening. They are coming in order to participate, as they have an active role in what is going on. The Divine Liturgy is a form of common worship, actively involving all the people of God and offered for their spiritual benefit. This is also the meaning of the Greek word "Liturgy" (λειτουργία = λαός (people) + ἔργον (work)).

Besides the Priests, Deacons, Chanters, Readers, and Altar Servers, every Christian in attendance must also know their role in the Divine Liturgy. This includes how to venerate the holy icons and how to light the candles. They should know when to stand, when to bow before the Priest, and when to make the sign of the Cross. The faithful should know when and how to join the Cantor in chanting. This includes the simple and well-known chants such as "Lord, have mercy", "Grant O Lord", and "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us". The Creed and the Our Father are also recited by everyone. Taken together, this demonstrates a living Community of Prayer. It helps the believer remain focused with heart and mind on the Divine Liturgy, rather than being distracted by other things.

For devout Christians, it is also considered a special blessing to prepare with reverence and prayer the prosphora (leavened bread) and bring them to the church, in order for the "AMNOS/THE LAMB" to be cut out of one of them, which during the Divine Liturgy will become the Holy Body of Christ. In the Orthodox tradition, it is

the faithful who provide what is needed for the Divine Liturgy to happen, and for the church to function properly. The people should care about the condition of the temple of God. This includes cleaning and anything else required. There are special prayers that the Priest offers for those who bring the necessities of common worship, and for those who work hard to ensure the cleanliness and good order of the church.

- The officiating Priest prays during the Prayer of Oblation: "Remember Lord, those who brought these gifts (the Bread and the Wine) and those for whom they have been offered..."

- "Again we pray for those who bring gifts and do good works in this holy and all-venerable church, for those who labor..." (The Great Litany).

- "Sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house; glorify them in return by Your divine power..." (the Prayer behind the Ambon). That is to say, sanctify, O Lord, and glorify with Your divine power those who love and care for the House of God, that it may be clean and tidy! Great blessings from God come to those who show such concern for His holy House.

For centuries, devout Orthodox families took great care on Saturdays to prepare physically and spiritually for the Divine Liturgy the next day. It was a serious matter, as all members of the family were going to the church to appear before the Lord. The best clothes and shoes they had were worn. On Saturday evenings, the food was simple and lenten, and after evening prayers, all members of the family asked forgiveness from each other.

If the parents had the appropriate knowledge, they prepared their children for the Gospel reading and if a special Feast was happening that day, to teach them about it. This was done in order to engage the children in what they would see and hear the next day in church, and help them participate more fully.

Today, with the help of the internet, it is very easy to find information that can help us all spiritually prepare on Saturdays for the Sunday Liturgy.