

Catechism & Theology Course

Session III, Class III: Orthodox Cycle of Worship, Services, & Calendar

1/30/2024

“A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian.”

- Evagrius of Pontus (345–399 AD)

More Than Sunday Divine Liturgy: Daily Cycle of Worship & Special Services

I. The Jewish Method of "Time"

The day begins at sunset and ends at sunset the following day. This is based upon the creation account in Genesis.

“And it was evening and it was morning, one day." The Jews under Moses initially prayed continually in the "Tent of the Meeting" and in time they specified particular times to pray at six watches.

II. From Moses Until Christ the Jews Divided the Day into 6 Parts:

- First - Dawn (Job. 3:9, 24:17); First Hour
"To You I pray, O Lord; in the morning You hear my voice!"
Psalm 5- Before the use of clocks the hours of the day were determined from sunrise. So the first hour is probably at 7 am. At this hour we ask God to guard us from everything that could harm us in either body or soul. As our senses are being awakened we ask for spiritual awakening through Jesus Christ who is the "true light who comes into the world." This is usually joined with the Matins prayers.
- Second - Morning: the rise of the sun from the horizon (Gen. 19:15)
- Third - The course of the day: 9:00 am
- Fourth - Noon (Gen. 43:16)
- Fifth - Cool of the day: afternoon (Gen. 3:8)
- Sixth - Nightfall: from sunset to dusk

At the time of Christ: the third, sixth, and ninth hours were designated as times of prayer, (Acts 2:15, 3:1, 10:3,9). The tradition developed around a prayer cycle of seven times a day in the early Church, based upon the prevailing customs, it was believed that David prayed seven times a day. "Seven times a day do I praise thy righteous judgments" (King David: Psalms 55:17, 6:6, 4:5, 188:62, 62:6, 5:3).

III. The Cycle of Prayers in the Greek Orthodox Church

Vespers: (Esperinon) The descent of Christ body from the cross; Old Testament Foundation: (Exodus 30:8 and Lev. 24:1-4). The Jews sanctified the evening with the lighting of a light. The Christians adopted this service and interpreted Christ as the Light of the world. By the 3rd century AD the Church was celebrating this service and the frame work was given for what is practices today. "O, Gladsome Light," can be dated from this period of time.

Again in the Orthodox Church the liturgical day begins in the evening with the setting of the sun. This practice follows the Biblical account of creation: "And there was evening and there was morning, one day" (Gen 1.5).

The Vespers service in the Church always begins with the chanting of the evening psalm: "... the sun knows it's time for setting, Thou makest darkness and it is night . . ." (Ps 104.19–20). This psalm, which glorifies God's creation of the world, is man's very first act of worship, for man first of all meets God as Creator.

*Bless the Lord, oh my soul, O Lord my God, Thou art very great . . .
O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all. The earth is full of Thy creatures (Ps 104.24).*

Following the psalm, the Great Litany, the opening petition of all liturgical services of the Church is intoned. In it we pray to the Lord for everyone and everything.

Following this litany a number of psalms are chanted, a different group each evening. These psalms normally are omitted in parish churches though they are done in monasteries. On the eve of Sunday, however, sections of the first psalm and the other psalms which are chanted to begin the week are usually sung even in parish churches. Psalm 141 is always sung at Vespers. During this psalm the evening incense is offered:

*Lord, I call upon Thee, hear me. Hear me, O Lord.
Let my prayer arise in Thy sight as incense.
And let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice. Hear me, O Lord (Ps 141.1–2).*

At this point special hymns are sung for the particular day. If it be a Church feast: songs in honor of the celebration are sung. On Saturday evenings, the eve of the Lord's Day, these hymns always praise Christ's resurrection from the dead.

The special hymns normally end with a song called a Theotokion which honors Mary, the Mother of Christ. Following this, the vesperal hymn is sung. If it be a special feast or the eve of Sunday, the celebrant will come to the center of the church building with lighted candles and incense. This hymn belongs to every Vespers service.

O Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the Immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ. Now we have come to the setting of the sun and behold the light of evening. We

praise God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For it is right at all times to worship Thee with voices of praise, O Son of God and Giver of Life, therefore all the world glorifies Thee. Christ is praised as the Light which illumines man's darkness, the Light of the world and of the Kingdom of God which shall have no evening (Is 60.20, Rev 21.25).

A verse from the Psalms, the prokeimenon, follows—a different one for each day, announcing the day's spiritual theme. If it be a special day, three readings from the Old Testament are included. Then more evening prayers and petitions follow with additional hymns for the particular day, all of which end with the chanting of the Song of Saint Simeon:

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation: which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people. A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and to be the glory of Thy people Israel (Lk 1.29–32).

After proclaiming our own vision of Christ, the Light and Salvation of the world, we say the prayers of the Thrice-Holy (trisagion) through to the Our Father. We sing the main theme song of the day, called the Troparion, and we are dismissed with the usual benediction.

The service of Vespers takes us through creation, sin, and salvation in Christ. It leads us to the meditation of God's word and the glorification of his love for men. It instructs us and allows us to praise God for the particular events or persons whose memory is celebrated and made present to us in the Church. It prepares us for the sleep of the night and the dawn of the new day to come. On the evening before the Divine Liturgy, it begins our movement into the most perfect communion with God in the sacramental mysteries.

Great Compline: (Apothipnon "After dinner") Christ's burial. This is to be celebrated every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday evening during Great Lent until Holy Tuesday of Holy Week. Typically, this might only be done the first Monday of Great Lent in the morning.

Midnight Prayer: (Mesonikton) Commemorates the night Christ was delivered to the Jews. This service takes place at dawn on Sunday morning before the matins service.

Matins (Orthros): Symbolically, commemorates when Christ was mocked and ridiculed. Matins is a morning prayer service which can be celebrated every day of the week. It precedes the Divine Liturgy in an extended form.

"O God, You are my God, early will I seek You!"

Psalm 63

At dawn we rise at sunrise and experiencing the goodness of God praise Him, give thanks, make petitions, and seek His blessing for the activities of the coming day.

It opens with the reading of six morning psalms and the intoning of the Great Litany. After this, verses of Psalm 118 are sung:

*God is the Lord and has revealed himself unto us.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*

The Troparion is then sung and, if it be a monastery, various groups of psalms which differ each day are read. Once again there are hymns on the theme of the particular day. On major feast days, special praises and psalms are sung, which on the Lord's Day sing of Christ's resurrection from the dead. On major feasts and on Sundays, the Gospel is also read.

After the Gospel there is a long intercessory prayer followed by a set of hymns and readings called the Canon. These songs are based on the Old Testament canticles and conclude with the song of Mary, the so-called Magnificat (Lk 1.46–55). The Great Doxology is chanted followed by the morning litanies. The troparion is also repeated once again before the congregation is dismissed to begin the activities of the day.

The Matins service of the Church unites the elements of morning psalmody and prayer with meditation on the Biblical canticles, the Gospel reading, and the particular theme of the day in the given verses and hymns. The themes of God's revelation and light are also always central to the morning service of the Church. Sometimes, particularly in churches of the Russian tradition, the Matins and the Vespers services are combined to form a long vigil service. On special feast days, the blessing of bread, wheat, wine, and oil is added to the Vespers, even when it is served separately from Matins. The faithful partake of the blessed food and are anointed with the oil as a sign of God's mercy and grace.

IV. The Daily Cycle of Prayer

First Hour Sunrise: Christ's delivery to the Gentiles.

Third Hour 9 am: Christ, condemned to death.

Sixth Hour 12 pm: Christ crucified.

Ninth Hour 3 pm: Christ gives up his spirit.

V. Special Services

- The Akathistos Hymn or the "The Salutation to the Theotokos" sung during the first five Fridays of Great Lent.
- The Small Compline: "In Peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety." This is conducted during the first 13 days of August. The "Small Paraklasis" is chanted on Monday, Wednesday and Fridays and the "Great Paraklasis" is chanted on Tuesday, Thursdays and Sunday. This service is also done upon request in homes at time of distress or illness. Holy Cross seminary celebrated it every Friday evening.
- The Royal Hours: The Royal hours are chanted Good Friday Morning and on December 23 in the morning. It contains all of the "Hours" but the psalms are changed in order to fit the Feasts of Christmas and Pascha.

- The Service of the Great Canon of Andrew of Crete: This is chanted Wednesday evening after the 4 Sunday of Lent.
- The Divine Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts: This takes place every Wednesday and Friday of Great Lent; on Thursday of the Great Canon; and on Holy Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week.
- The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil: This is celebrated ten times a year. On January 1 (The Feast of St. Basil); on the 5 Sunday of Great Lent; on the eve of Christmas and the eve of Theophany January 5.
- The Mystery of Holy Unction: This is celebrated on Holy Wednesday of Holy Week and upon request by parishioners.
- The Service for the Sanctification of Water (Great and Small Agiasmos):
The Great Agiasmos is conducted twice a year on Jan 5 and 6. (The service is identical) The first one is conducted at the Vesperal Liturgy of St. Basil in the evening of Jan 5, after the prayer of the Amvon. The next day it is celebrated again between the Orhros and Liturgy (or after the Liturgy) of St. John Chrysostom. This water is also consumed on this day.
- The Small Agiasmos is celebrated more frequently. Traditionally it is celebrated on the first day of each month. It conveyed the fact that all time and space is now sanctified by Christ. It can also be conducted upon request in the case of illness, blessing of homes or in a "time of need."
- Memorial Services: Saturday is the proper day for memorials. It is on the "Sabbath" that God "rested" and it is on "Great and Holy Saturday" that the Church waits in anticipation Christ rising from the dead. Sunday ("The Lord's Day") is the "Day of the Resurrection" on it we ought to rejoice in this Feast-our departed are joyously present and their separation from us is not to be mourned on this day.
- Saturday of the Souls/Memorial Service: On these Saturdays the Church sets apart the commemoration of all the members who have fallen asleep in Christ. Names are traditionally written down and handed in to the priest prior to the service so that they may be remembered in the Liturgy on these days. The Saturday of the Souls are celebrated on the Two Saturdays before Lent begins; the First Saturday of Lent; and the Saturday before Pentecost.
- The Divine Liturgy of St. Jacob (called James; Iakovos): Celebrated on October 23.

Church Year

Although the first of September is considered the start of the Church year, according to the Orthodox Church calendar, the real liturgical center of the annual cycle of Orthodox worship is the feast of the Resurrection of Christ. All elements of Orthodox liturgical piety point to and flow from Pascha, the celebration of the New Christian Passover. Even the “fixed feasts” of the Church such as Christmas and Epiphany which are celebrated according to a fixed date on the calendar take their liturgical form and inspiration from the Paschal feast.

The Paschal cycle of worship begins with the season of Great Lent, preceded by the special pre-lenten Sundays. The lenten order of worship fulfills itself in Holy Week and the Great Day of Christ’s Resurrection. Following Pascha there are the fifty days of paschal celebration until the feast of Pentecost. Every week of the year is then considered in the Church’s worship as a “Sunday after Pentecost.” The weeks are counted in this way (First Sunday, Second Sunday, etc.) until the pre-lenten season begins again when the weeks are given their name and central content of worship in view of the annual return of Pascha.

There are two special liturgical books for the Easter cycle of worship, the Lenten Triodion and the Paschal Triodion (literally the Flower Triodion), which is also called the Pentecostarion. These books are called Triodions because of the “three odes” which are often sung during the church services of these seasons.

The Sundays and weeks following Pentecost also have their special book called the Octoechos which literally means the “eight tones.” The Octoechos contains the services for each day of the week. Sunday is always dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ. Wednesdays and Fridays commemorate Christ’s suffering and crucifixion. Monday’s theme is the “bodiless powers” the angels. Tuesday is dedicated to the memory of John the Baptist, Thursday to the apostles and Saint Nicholas, and Saturday to the Theotokos with the memory of the departed.

On each day of the week, beginning with the eve of the Lord’s Day, the services are sung in the same “tone” or musical melody. There are eight sets of services in eight different “tones” (hence, the name Octoechos), sung in a revolving pattern throughout the year. Thus, for example, on the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost there would be Tone 1; the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 2; the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 3, and so on until the 10th Sunday which is again Tone 1. This cycle of “tones” exists for every week of the year, although when the lenten season approaches the emphasis falls once more upon the preparation for the celebration of Pascha.

In addition to the Easter cycle of worship with the “weeks after Pentecost,” and existing together with it, is the Church’s worship for each particular day of the year, each of which is dedicated to certain saints or sacred events. Each month has a special liturgical book called the Menaion which contains the specific service for each day of that month. The solemnity of the day is proportionate to the importance and popularity of the given saints or events to be commemorated.

There are twelve major feast days of the Church which are universally celebrated: the Nativity, Epiphany, Presentation into the Temple (or the “Meeting of the Lord in the Temple”),

Transfiguration of Christ; the Nativity of the Theotokos, Annunciation, Presentation of the Theotokos, Dormition of Mary, and the Exaltation of the Cross; and, from the Paschal cycle, the feast of the Lord's entry into Jerusalem, the feast of the Lord's Ascension and the feast of Pentecost. Easter is not counted among the twelve major feasts of the Church since it is considered by itself as "the feast of feasts."

Different Orthodox churches emphasize the other days of the year according to their particular relevancy and significance. Thus, the day of Saint Sergius would be greatly celebrated in Russia, Saint Spiridon in Greece, and Saint Herman in America. Some days, such as Saints Peter and Paul, Saint Nicholas, and Saint Michael, also enjoy a universal popularity in the church.

Major Feasts of the Church:

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| September 8 | The Nativity of Mary the Theotokos |
| September 14 | The Exaltation of the Cross |
| November 21 | The Presentation of the Theotokos to the Temple |
| December 25 | The Nativity of Christ |
| January 6 | The Epiphany: The Baptism of Christ |
| February 2 | The Meeting of Christ in the Temple |
| March 25 | The Annunciation |
| August 6 | The Transfiguration of Christ |
| August 15 | The Dormition of the Theotokos |

Calculated according to the Spring Equinox (Council of Nicaea):

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| Palm Sunday | The Entry into Jerusalem |
| PASCHA | Christ's Resurrection |
| Ascension | The Ascension of Christ |
| Pentecost | The Descent of the Holy Spirit |

The feast of Christmas has its own cycle of prayer patterned after Easter. There is a forty-day lent preceding it and a post-feast celebration following it. The feasts of Mary's Dormition and Saints Peter and Paul also have traditional lenten preparations of shorter duration. Most of the major feasts have a prefeastal preparation of liturgical prayer, and a post-feastal glorification. This means that the feast is called to mind and is glorified in the Church's liturgical services in anticipation of its coming and is also celebrated in songs and prayers for some days in the Church after its passing.

More on Feasts of the Year

Feast Days of the Liturgical Seasons of the Year including the Twelve Great Feasts, the Pre-Lenten Sundays, the Lenten Commemorations, Holy Week, Great and Holy Pascha, Bright Week and Paschaltide, and Pentecost and the Sundays of All Saints.

The Pre-Lenten Sundays

Sunday of Zacchaeus
Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee
Sunday of the Prodigal Son
Sunday of the Last Judgment
Sunday of Cheesefare (Expulsion of Adam from Paradise)

The Lenten Commemorations

1st Sunday: The Sunday of Orthodoxy
2nd Sunday: The Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas
Memorial Saturday: St. Theodore the Recruit
3rd Sunday: The Sunday of the Cross
4th Sunday: The Sunday of St. John Climacus
Saturday of the Akathist to Mary: Akathist Icon
5th Sunday: Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt
Lazarus Saturday: Raising of Lazarus

Holy Week

Palm Sunday: The Feast of the Entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem
Holy Monday: The Bridegroom
Holy Tuesday: Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins
Holy Wednesday: Washing of the Disciples Feet
Holy Thursday: Mystical Supper
Holy Thursday: Crucifixion
Holy Friday: Taking down from the Cross
Holy Friday: The Burial of Our Lord
Holy Saturday: Descent into Hades
Holy Saturday: The Angel at the Tomb

Great & Holy Pascha

Bright Week and Paschal Tide

Bright Friday: Life-giving Spring
2nd Sunday of Pascha: St. Thomas Sunday
3rd Sunday of Pascha: Myrrhbearing Women Sunday
4th Sunday of Pascha: Paralytic Sunday

4th Wednesday of Pascha: Midfeast of Pentecost
5th Sunday of Pascha: Samaritan Woman Sunday
6th Sunday of Pascha: Blind Man Sunday
6th Wednesday of Pascha: Leavetaking of Pascha
40 Days after Pascha: Ascension
7th Sunday of Pascha: Fathers of the 1st Ecumenical Council
7th Saturday of Pascha: Memorial Saturday

Pentecost and the Sundays of All Saints

50 Days after Pascha: Great & Holy Pentecost

Pentecost Week: Day of the Holy Spirit

1st Sunday after Pentecost: Sunday of All Saints
2nd Sunday after Pentecost: All Saints of North America

The Lesser Feasts/Saints