

# St. Luke American Coptic Orthodox Church



# The Divine Liturgy

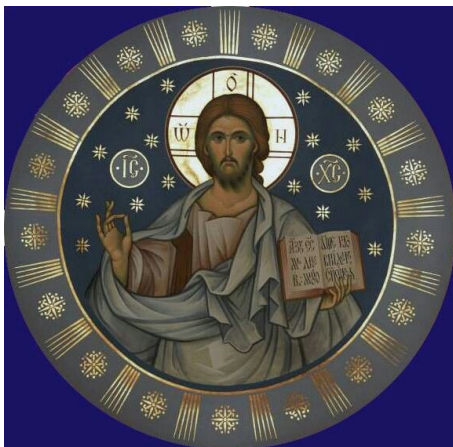
"For My flesh is food indeed and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him" John 6:56-57

# A Journey to Heaven

The word liturgy (leitourgia) is a Greek word meaning “work of the people.” This word is used in a broad sense to refer to official ritual services of the Church. However, most Orthodox Christians use this word to refer to the “Divine Liturgy,” or the “Liturgy of the Eucharist.” The Divine Liturgy entails prayer and worship culminating in the change by the Holy Spirit of the bread and wine into the real Body and Blood of Jesus Christ (the Eucharist) just as Christ did during His Last Supper with the Apostles. Only those that are baptized in the Orthodox Christian faith and who have prepared their spirits by confessing their sins may partake of the Eucharist, which is the means by which the faithful are cleansed of their iniquities.

## The History of the Divine Liturgy

Today the Divine Liturgy consists of predetermined set of prayers celebrated by the clergy and responses by the deacons and congregation in a specific order and accompanied by particular rites. On different occasions there are certain predetermined



changes to the deacon and congregation responses to commemorate particular events such as the Resurrection or the Birth of Christ.

One of the first compositions of the Divine Liturgy was by St. Mark the Apostle which later was modified by St. Cyril I, the 24<sup>th</sup> Pope of the Coptic Church. This liturgy is known as St. Cyril’s liturgy and is one of the oldest liturgies known to the Christian world. Two additional liturgies were formed, both of which were derived from St. Cyril’s, for a total of three liturgies used in the Church today which are: the liturgy according to St. Basil, bishop of Caesarea and liturgy according to St. Gregory the Theologian, bishop of Constantinople.

## The Rituals during the Divine Liturgy

The word “rite” in Arabic is pronounced “tuks,” which is in turn derived from the Greek word “taxis” meaning a “system” or “order.” In the Church, this refers to the method by which liturgical worship takes place. This includes the reaction of verbal prayers and the reenactment of certain symbolic motions and gestures. Nearly every motion by the deacons and the clergy during worship carries with it a deep spiritual meaning, some of which may not be instantly apparent to the observer.

One might wonder why there is so much emphasis on order in the Liturgy. First, the Church is continuing what has been handed down to her since the Apostles, who set in motion aspects of the liturgy that were prescribed by Christ himself. Secondly, it is clear in the Bible that from the beginning of time God mandated certain rituals for worshipping Him, “for God is not the author of confusions but of peace” and hence, “let all things be done decently and in order” 1 Corinthians 14: 33,40. In the Bible, a large portion of the book of Exodus and nearly the entire book of Leviticus are dedicated to explain how God wanted the Israelites to worship Him. Requiring certain order and rituals in the service of the Divine Liturgy establish the continuity of God’s accepted worship from past to present.

## The Divine Liturgy: Active Participation

Before embarking on an explanation of the components of the Divine Liturgy, it is important to note that this service is not a performance to be watched by non-participant spectators, but actually it entails the active participation of clergy, deacons and the congregation in a continuous state of prayer and worship. All throughout the Divine Liturgy, the priest offers prayers to God, which are almost always followed by a deacon who verbally directs all present to do something (either is to pray for a particular purpose, to pay attention, to remain standing, etc.) Hence the Divine Liturgy truly becomes the “work of the people” as a whole celebration of god’s presence among His people.

## The Components of the Divine Liturgy

The main focus of the Divine Liturgy is to receive the “mystery of mysteries” whereby the bread and wine changed to the Body and Blood of Christ. In its love and honor of this event, the Coptic Church long ago set out a certain formula for prayers and worship to precede this momentous event.

Preparation for the Divine liturgy begins the night before with **Prayers of the Evening Hour** (from a prayer book referred to as the “Book of Hours,” of the Agpeya), the **Raising of the Evening Incense** (prayers and worship in the evening accompanied by the use of the censor and incense), the **Midnight Psalmody** (a beautiful arranged set of praises and worship that are sung in about 15 different tunes), followed by the **Prayer of the Morning Hour** (which is to be prayed early in the morning, being one of several prayers to be prayed from the Agpeya), and finally the **Raising of the Morning Incense** (which is virtually identical to the Raising of the Evening Incense except that it is celebrated in the morning).

While traditionally this lasts all night and is immediately followed by the service of the Divine Liturgy, more commonly the preparation prayers are now prayed the night before, followed by everyone retreating to their homes. All faithful would then return early the next morning to pray the prayers of the Raising of the Morning Incense and then the Divine Liturgy.

## The Divine Liturgy can be divided into four main parts:

- 1. The offertory:** Immediately following the raising of the morning incense, the priest and deacons dress in their Liturgical garments. Then the clergy is “offered” a selection of special bread from which to choose the “Lamb” (resembling Christ) who be slain as a sacrifice for the remission of sins. The priest then baptizes the Lamb in water and then through a series of motions recalls the crucifixion and burial of Christ.
- 2. The Liturgy of the Word (or Catechumens):** This portion of the Divine Liturgy constitutes a selection of readings from the New Testament and a reading from the Synaxarium (a book which commemorates the lives of the saints and other notable events), culminating to the reading of a portion of the Gospel. Usually this is followed by a sermon from the clergy.
- 3. The Pre-Anaphora:** Anaphora refers to the part of the Divine Liturgy where the Bread and Wine change to the Body and Blood of Christ. Just before the Anaphora is the Pre-Anaphora, constituting a recitation of the Nicene Creed (a summary of the Orthodox theological beliefs) and the Prayer of the Reconciliation (where we recall how humans, who were estranged from God due to their fall caused by the first sin, were reconciled to God by Christ who took upon himself and redeemed it to Himself). Moreover, all Christians present are then asked to ensure that everyone is reconciled with each other through the “holy kiss” and that there is nothing standing in the way of caring for and being at peace with one another.
- 4. The Anaphora:** Finally, we arrive at the most significant part of the Divine Liturgy. First the church joins with the angels who stand before God to recite one of their hymns (The Cherubim worship You). Then, the priest recalls the Mystical Supper, uttering the words that Christ Himself spoke to His disciples when He instituted the mystery of the Eucharist. The

priest then invokes the Holy Spirit to change the Bread and Wine into the true Body and Blood of Christ. Several litanies are then recited to pray for the Church, the hierarchy, salvation of the world, the environment, and the oblations. The Church then remembers all the saints who have perfected us and are praying for us in heaven. This is followed by the Fraction prayer where the Body is divided. The Liturgy is concluded by a final confession that "This is the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ" and the distribution of the Holy Mysteries.

### Significance of the Eucharist:

It is absolutely necessary to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ in order to live eternally with Him in heaven. "Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.'" Joh 6:53-54

