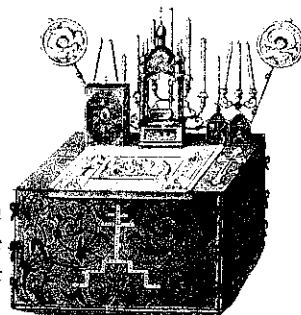




The Meaning of our Divine Services, part one: Divine Liturgy, "The Altar Table"

The catholic consciousness of the Church, where it concerns the teaching of faith, is also expressed in the Orthodox Divine Services which have been handed down to us by the Ecumenical Church. By entering deeply into the content of the Divine service books we make ourselves firmer in the dogmatic teaching of the Orthodox Church.

✦Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*



This week we begin a six-month series (25 installments) of articles on the Divine Services of the Church to conclude on the eve of the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Although the Divine Services transmit the essence of our Faith, experiencing them can be so overwhelming that it imperils the correct understanding of their meaning.

The importance of attending Divine Services cannot be overstated. Protestants sometimes ask, "What would Jesus do?" as if it is possible to imitate the Lord through a mere act of will. The Orthodox spiritual life, on the other hand, allows the Lord to work through us; we grow into the likeness of Christ through the acquisition of grace. Whereas we do use our will to obey the Lord's commandments, we can only acquire grace through a synergistic communion with Him: by receiving His Precious Body and Blood and by participating in His Services so that the prayers of the Church become the voice of our spirit crying to the Lord. In this way, our spirit is oriented toward Christ.

Let us begin our study of the Divine Liturgy by considering the Holy Altar Table, the Throne of God, wherein the Divine Sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood occurs. The image of the Divine Liturgy is given to us in Revelation. Read chapters 4 & 5 of Revelation and you will see how the Hierarchal Divine Liturgy follows the vision of St. John, which depicts the Church Triumphant in Heaven. Those who claim that the Divine Liturgy is not Scriptural fail to see how St. John's vision uncovers (*apocalypse*) the Mystical Supper instituted by the Lord. As an image of the New Jerusalem, the **Holy Table's** "length and breadth and height are equal" (Rev. 21:16). Each consecrated Altar has sealed within it **the relics of a martyr** (our Altar contains the relics of Great Martyr Lazar), because St. John saw "under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God" (Rev. 6:9). The Table is covered with a **white linen** and, over that, an **elaborate brocade**; in this way it is vested like the priest who wears an elaborate brocade *phelonion* (cape) over a white linen *sticharion* (robe). On the Table is the **antimins** ('instead of the Altar'): a linen cloth with relics sown into it (ours also has the relics of St. Lazar), the image of Christ's descent from the Cross, and the signature of the Bishop who lends it to the Church. Originally, the **antimins** were only for temporary Altars that were not consecrated, but now all Altars have one: it represents the sacrificed Lamb: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain" (Rev. 5:12). On the Altar is a **Gospel** with an icon of the Resurrected Christ on the cover and the images of the **four Evangelists**: "And the first beast was like a lion [Mark who represents Christ as the King of all men], and the second beast like a calf [Luke who emphasizes Christ as the sacrifice offered for all men], and the third beast had a face as a man [Matthew who represents Christ as the Son of Man], and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle [John's exalted theology]" (Rev. 4:7). Next to the Gospel is a **cross**, which represents Christ's victory over the devil. The **seven-branched candelabrum** represents the "seven golden candlesticks" (Rev. 1:12) amidst which Christ appears; it also harkens back to the layout for the Tent of Meeting in Exodus 25:37. Behind the Altar are images of the **seraphim**, representing the two cherubim of gold that covered the mercy seat of the Ark (Exodus 25:18) and the elevated **Crucifix**, representing Christ hanging on the Tree, the Fruit of Eternal Life, the tasting of which can overcome the death that entered into the world through eating the forbidden fruit. Importantly, in a **Tabernacle** (small container shaped like a temple) either on the Table or suspended above it, is the **Lamb Himself**: a small particle of Christ's Body & Blood for communing those sick or near death.

Next Week: The Divine Liturgy, "The Great Litany"

+Deacon Daniel