



The Meaning of our Divine Services, part two: Divine Liturgy, "The Great Litany"



The Liturgy of the Catechumens begins with the announcement of the Kingdom of Heaven and ends before the Passion [. . .] We find the death of Christ twice: first in the Proskomedie (with the entombment after the Great Entrance), and secondly after the Consecration [. . .] The Liturgy of the Catechumens, which is Christ's ministry on earth, thus falls between His death during the Proskomedie and His entombment after the Great Entrance.

✦Mother Maria, "The Experience of the Liturgy" in *An Introduction to the Divine Liturgy*

This Liturgy of the Catechumens is the second of the three-part Divine Liturgy. Bishop Alexander (Mileant) of Buenos Aires and South America (†2005) describes it as the point where "the faithful are prepared for the Mystery." This preparation takes place by emphasizing the teachings of Christ during His earthly ministry, which are available not only to the faithful but to those who are preparing to be received into the Church (Gr. *katechoumenos* 'one being taught orally'), hence: "Liturgy of the Catechumens." Although only the second of three parts, we begin our study with the Liturgy of the Catechumens because it is the first part most people experience.

The service begins with the deacon asking the priest, who represents the Bishop's authority, to bless. Note that in the Church, everything follows a correct order: just as nine ranks of angels serve the Lord, so too do the lower orders of clergy serve the bishop. Deacon literally means "servant" and his *orarion* (the distinctive stole he wears either on his shoulder or crossed about his chest) represents the wings of the angels. The priest responds not with his own blessing, but with the exclamation that the Heavenly Kingdom is blessed. In so doing, he follows in the footsteps of Christ, who proclaimed the Kingdom at hand (Mark 1:15) and St. Paul who expounded on the Kingdom (Acts 28:23). The priest's exclamation signals that during the Liturgy, we experience the very same Kingdom Christ proclaimed. The curtain behind the Royal Doors, which represents the veil separating the earthly from the spiritual, is pulled back to represent the Kingdom of Heaven peaking through to us. However, the Royal Doors remain closed because the Kingdom can only be understood partially in this manner: that is why Christ used parables to explain it to His apostles. We still "see through a glass, darkly" (I Cor. 13:12). While exclaiming "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages," the priest makes the sign of the cross with the Gospel over the Altar Table, signifying that this is the part of the Divine Liturgy where the Word will be proclaimed and, in the homily, expounded. For this reason, the Liturgy of the Catechumens is sometimes called the Liturgy of the Word. The people respond with "Amen," which means "so let it be," "verily," and "truly" in Hebrew. By so responding, all consent to the unfolding of the Kingdom.

The deacon, standing before the Royal Doors, is outside the Altar with the faithful. He begins the petitions that we all pray, supplicating our Lord in Heaven to have mercy on us who have been, since the Fall, exiled from Paradise where Adam and Eve freely walked with God in spiritual concord. These petitions are called the "Great Litany" or "Great Ectenia." Litany derives from the Greek *litanos*, which means 'entreating'; *ectenia* means 'extended' or 'protracted,' meaning that these petitions are a protracted list of supplications. The deacon is leading the people in prayer, intoning the supplications that all are praying in the heart. It is important to emphasize here that the mystical action of prayer takes place silently within the hearts of all present. The deacon's supplications are not meant to replace this necessary spiritual and interior movement, but rather to provide direction.

The first three supplications are for the peace that is necessary before we can enter the Kingdom: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matt. 5:23-24). St. Paul begins most of his epistles by evoking this peace from above: "Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:2). It is for this reason the priest begs forgiveness from the clergy and people before beginning the service. In like manner should we ask forgiveness of our brother and sister before Liturgy begins.

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

✦Deacon Daniel