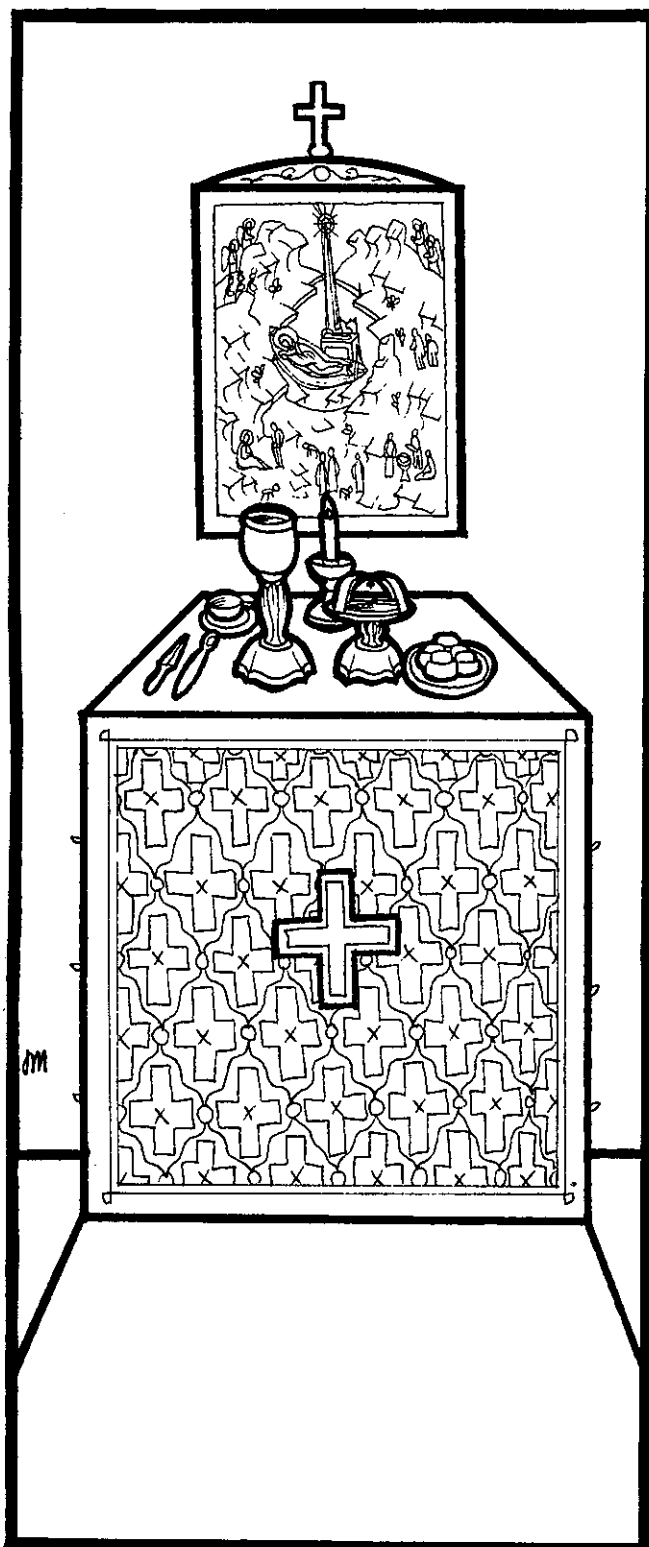


Oblation Table



As we face the altar area the **table of oblation** on which the bread and wine are prepared for the liturgy stands on the left side of the altar table. The **chalice**—the cup for the wine—and the **diskos**—the round plate, elevated on a stand, for the bread—are kept on this table. These vessels are normally decorated with iconographic engravings, Christian symbols and the sign of the cross.

On this table there is also a special liturgical knife—symbolically called the **spear**—which is used for cutting the eucharistic bread, and a liturgical **spoon** for administering holy communion to the people. There are also special covers for the chalice and diskos and a cruciform piece of metal called the **star** which holds the cover over the eucharistic bread on the diskos. A sponge and cloths for drying the chalice after the liturgy are also usually kept here. The oblation table is decorated in a manner similar to that of the altar table.

Above the **table of oblation** (the table on which the gifts for holy communion are prepared), which stands in the altar area to the left of the altar table, one might find various icons. A favorite one is that of Christ praying in Gethsemane: “Let this cup pass...” Another is that of the Nativity, although this is due to a symbolical interpretation of the Divine Liturgy which is not indicative of the fundamental liturgical tradition of the Church. (See Chapter V on the Divine Liturgy.)

The Divine Liturgy

The word **liturgy** means **common work** or **common action**. The **Divine Liturgy** is the common work of the Orthodox Church. It is the official action of the Church formally gathered together as the chosen People of God. The word **church**, as we remember means a gathering or assembly of people specifically chosen and called apart to perform a particular task.

The Divine Liturgy is the common action of Orthodox Christians officially gathered to constitute the Orthodox Church. It is the action of the Church assembled by God in order to be together in one community to worship, to pray, to sing, to hear God's Word, to be instructed in God's commandments, to offer itself with thanksgiving in Christ to God the Father, and to have the living experience of God's eternal kingdom through communion with the same Christ Who is present in his people by the Holy Spirit.

The Divine Liturgy is always done by Orthodox Christians on the **Lord's Day** which is **Sunday**, the "day after Sabbath" which is symbolic of the first day of creation and the last day—or as it is called in Holy Tradition, the **eighth day**—of the Kingdom of God. This is the day of Christ's resurrection from the dead, the day of God's judgment and victory predicted by the prophets, the **Day of the Lord** which inaugurates the presence and the power of the "kingdom to come" already now within the life of this present world.

The Divine Liturgy is also celebrated by the Church on special feast days. It is usually celebrated daily in monasteries, and in some large cathedrals and parish churches, with the exception of the week days of Great Lent when it is not served because of its paschal character. (See above pp. 77)

As the common action of the People of God, the **Divine Liturgy** may be celebrated only once on any given day in an Orthodox Christian community. All

of the members of the Church must be gathered together with their pastor in one place at one time. This includes even small children and infants who participate fully in the communion of the liturgy from the day of their entrance into the Church through baptism and chrismation. **Always everyone, always together.** This is the traditional expression of the Orthodox Church about the Divine Liturgy.

Because of its common character, the Divine Liturgy may never be celebrated privately by the clergy alone. It may never be served just for some and not for others, but for all. It may never be served merely for some private purposes or some specific or exclusive intentions. Thus there may be, and usually are, special petitions at the Divine Liturgy for the sick or the departed, or for some very particular purposes or projects, but there is never a Divine Liturgy which is done exclusively for private individuals or specific isolated purposes or intentions. The Divine Liturgy is always "on behalf of all and for all."

Because the Divine Liturgy exists for no other reason than to be the official all-inclusive act of prayer, worship, teaching and communion of the entire Church in heaven and on earth, it may not be considered merely as one devotion among many, not even the highest or the greatest. The Divine Liturgy is not an act of personal piety. It is not a prayer service. It is not merely one of the sacraments. The Divine Liturgy is the one common sacrament of the very being of the Church Itself. It is the one sacramental manifestation of the essence of the Church as the Community of God in heaven and on earth. It is the one unique sacramental revelation of the Church as the mystical Body and Bride of Christ.

As the central mystical action of the whole church, the Divine Liturgy is always resurrectional in spirit. It is always the manifestation to his people of the

Risen Christ. It is always an outpouring of the life-creating Spirit. It is always communion with God the Father. The Divine Liturgy, therefore, is never mournful or penitential. It is never the expression of the darkness and death of this world. It is always the expression and the experience of the eternal life of the Kingdom of the Blessed Trinity.

The Divine Liturgy celebrated by the Orthodox Church is called the **Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom**. It is a shorter liturgy than the so-called **Liturgy of St. Basil the Great** which is used only ten times during the Church Year. These two liturgies probably received their present form after the ninth century. It is not the case that they were written exactly as they now stand by the saints whose names they carry. It is quite certain, however, that the eucharistic prayers of each of these liturgies were formulated as early as the fourth and fifth centuries when these saints lived and worked in the Church.

The Divine Liturgy has two main parts. The first part is the **gathering**, called the **synaxis**. It has its origin in the synagogue gatherings of the Old Testament, and is centered in the proclamation and meditation of the Word of God. The second part of the Divine Liturgy is the **eucharistic sacrifice**. It has its origin in the Old Testament temple worship, the priestly sacrifices of the People of God; and in the central saving event of the Old Testament, the Passover (Pascha).

In the New Testament Church Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God, and it is the Christian gospels and apostolic writings which are proclaimed and meditated at the first part of the Divine Liturgy. And in the New Testament Church, the central saving event is the one perfect, eternal and all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the one great **High Priest** who is also the **Lamb of God** slain for the salvation of the world, the **New Passover**. At the Divine Liturgy the faithful Christians

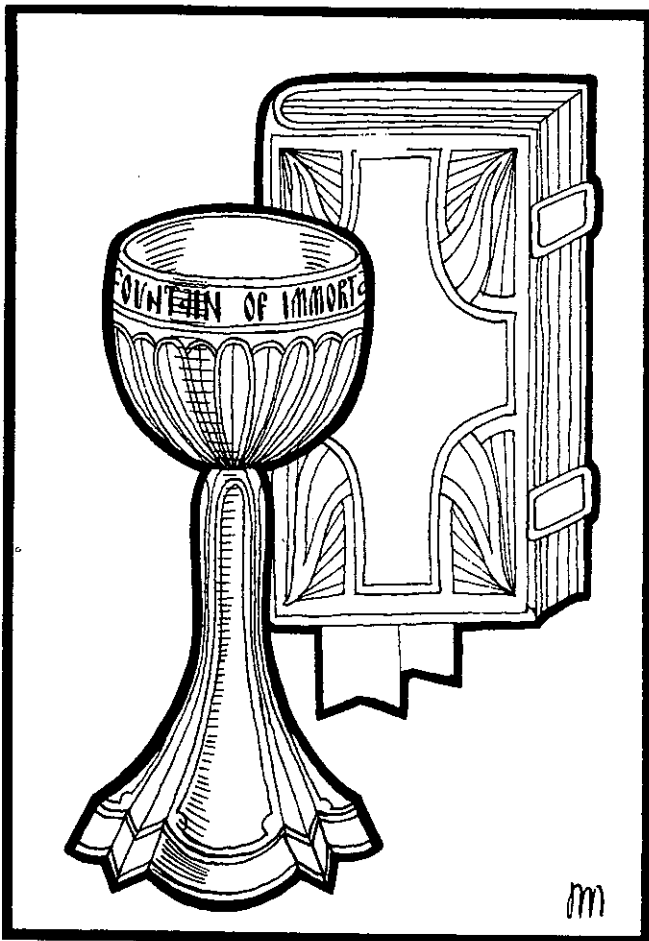
participate in the voluntary self-offering of Christ to the Father, accomplished once and for all upon the Cross by the power of the Holy Spirit. In and through this unique sacrifice of Christ, the faithful Christians receive Holy Communion with God.

For centuries it was the practice of the Church to admit all persons to the first part of the Divine Liturgy, while reserving the second part strictly for those who were formally committed to Christ through baptism and chrismation in the Church. Non-baptized persons were not permitted even to witness the offering and receiving of Holy Communion by the faithful Christians. Thus the first part of the Divine Liturgy came to be called the **Liturgy of the Catechumens**, that is, the liturgy of those who were receiving instructions in the Christian Faith in order to become members of the Church through baptism and chrismation. It also came to be called, for obvious reasons, the **Liturgy of the Word**. The second part of the Divine Liturgy came to be called the **Liturgy of the Faithful**.

Although it is generally the practice in the Orthodox Church today to allow non-Orthodox Christians, and even non-Christians, to witness the Liturgy of the Faithful, it is still the practice to reserve actual participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion only to members of the Orthodox Church who are fully committed to the life and teachings of the Orthodox Faith as preserved, proclaimed and practiced by the Church throughout its history.

In the commentary on the Divine Liturgy which follows, we will concentrate our attention on what happens to the Church at its "common action." By doing this we will attempt to penetrate the fundamental and essential meaning of the liturgy for man, his life and his world. This will be a definite departure from the interpretation of the Divine Liturgy which treats the service as if it were a drama enacted by the clergy and

“attended” by the people, in which each part stands for some aspect of Christ’s life and work. (e. g., the prothesis stands for Christ’s birth; the small entrance for the beginning of his public ministry, the gospel for his preaching, the great entrance for Palm Sunday, etc.) This latter type of interpretation of the Divine Liturgy is an invention which, although perhaps interesting and inspiring for some, is nevertheless completely alien to the genuine meaning and purpose of the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church.



Before the actual beginning of the Divine Liturgy, the priest enters the Church with special prayers, and puts on his liturgical vestments. He then goes to the table of oblation to prepare the bread and wine for Holy Communion. This part of the liturgy is called the prothesis or proskomede which means preparation.

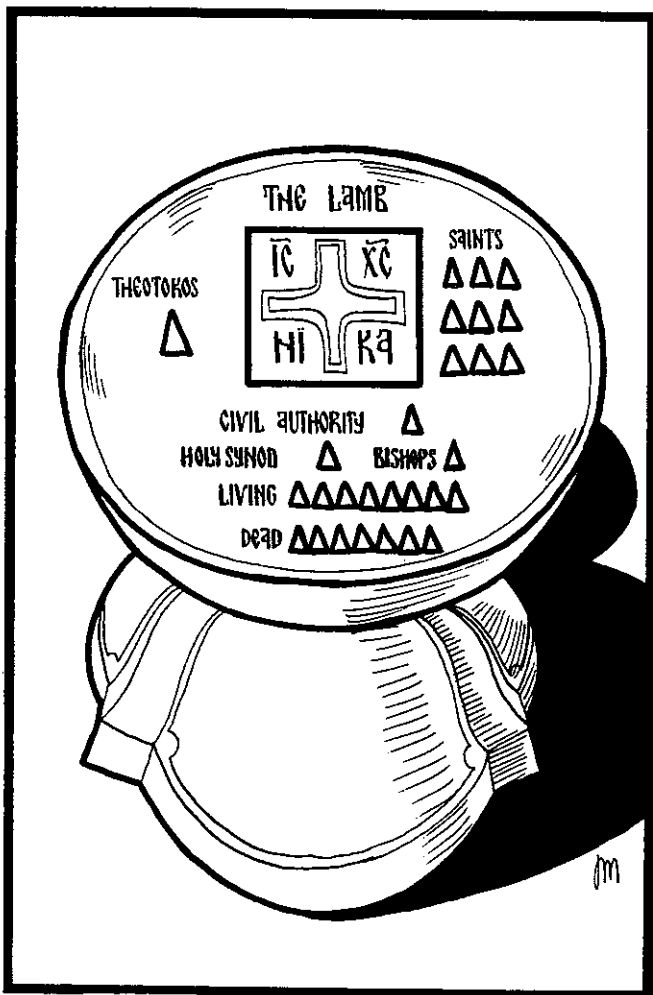
In its present form, the prothesis probably dates from the fourteenth century. When a bishop is celebrating the Divine Liturgy, the prothesis is performed just before the offertory procession called the Great Entrance. Otherwise it is done before the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word.

At the prothesis the priest first cuts a large cube of bread from the loaf of bread, traditionally called the prosthora, which means the offering. This cube of bread is called the Lamb. It stands for Christ, the “Bread of life. . . which came down from heaven,” the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 3:29, 6:32-15)

While the priest is cutting the Lamb from the prosthora bread, he recites verses from the Prophecy of Isaiah: He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. . . (Isaiah 53:7-8) He cuts the Lamb so that the seal with which the prosthora bread is sealed, is on the top, in the center. The seal is a square with the symbols of Jesus Christ (IC XC) on the top and The Victor (NI KA) on the bottom. The Lamb is then cut from the bottom in the sign of a cross so that it can be easily broken into four pieces at the time of Holy Communion in the liturgy. (See below p. 191) The priest also symbolically pierces the side of the Lamb with the liturgical knife, traditionally called the spear, reciting the words of John 19:34-35.

After having poured wine mixed with water into the chalice, the priest then places a piece of bread on the diskos next to the Lamb in remembrance of the

Theotokos. Then pieces of bread are placed on the diskos in memory of John the Baptist, the prophets, apostles, hierarchs, martyrs, monastic saints, healers, and the whole company of the righteous with special mention of the saints commemorated on that particular day. Finally a piece of bread is placed on the diskos in memory of the saint whose liturgy is being celebrated.



In addition, pieces of bread are placed on the diskos for the bishop of the given church, for the civil authorities of the country and for all of the faithful both living and dead, once more with particular mention by name of those particularly remembered by the local community. (See Chart)

The diskos and the chalice are then covered with special covers, while the priest recites Psalm 93, and other psalm verses with the offering of incense. He finally recites in conclusion the following prayer:

O God, our God, who didst send the Heavenly Bread, the Food of the whole world, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, to be our Saviour, Redeemer and Benefactor, blessing and sanctifying us; Bless this offering, and accept it upon Thy heavenly altar. Remember those who offer it and for whom it is offered, for Thou art good and lovest mankind. Preserve us blameless in the celebration of Thy divine mysteries. For sanctified and glorified is Thy most honorable and majestic name; of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

The small dismissal and benediction follow this prayer, thus ending the service of the prothesis.

The prothesis is a rather late development in the history of the Divine Liturgy. It signifies the gathering of the entire Church of God into one great assembly: Christ the Head, together with the Theotokos and all the members of his Body, those already glorified with him in the presence of the Father, together with all of the faithful disciples on earth. The prothesis clearly shows that the eucharistic liturgy is always the action of the entire Church, with its head Jesus Christ, and is always offered "on behalf of all and for all."