

The Proskomedie or The Liturgy of Preparation

Or

What happens in Church on Sunday before I get there?

The Liturgy of Preparation, is also known as the Prothesis (from the Greek:: Πρόθεσις, which literally means: "a setting forth") or sometimes more commonly Proskomedie (Προσκομιδή *Proskomidē* "an offering, an oblation") is the name given to the act of preparing the bread and wine for the Divine Liturgy or Eucharist, as it sometimes called, and occurs on a Sunday (or any day that the Liturgy is being served) morning before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. .

In the Orthodox Church, the bread used for the Liturgy is referred to as prosphora (Gk: offering, especially to God) Prosphora is plural; prosphoron is singular. A prosphoron is a round loaf of leavened bread which is baked in two layers to represent the two natures of Christ-the divine and the human. . It has a square seal on the top side which has inscribed on it a cross and the Greek letters IC (an abbreviation in Greek for "Jesus") XC ("Christ") and NIKA ("Conquers"). The portion of the loaf that is cut out along this seal is called the Lamb or Host, from which all are communicated, and therefore must be proportionately large for the number of communicants.

Prosphora must be made using only the finest wheat flour, water, salt, and yeast. It should be freshly baked and without blemish.

In the Greek Churches only one large loaf is used for the Liturgy of Preparation, with a large round seal on it inscribed not only with the square seal mentioned above (from which the Lamb is taken), but also markings indicating where the portions for the Mother of God, the Ranks, the Living and Dead are removed.

Those churches which follow Slavic usage use five small loaves, recalling the five loaves from which Christ fed the multitude (Jn 6 vv 5-14). Normally all are stamped with a small square seal, though special seals for the Mother of God are sometimes used for one of the loaves.

In all traditions, only the Lamb-the central bit of the prosphora-is actually consecrated, other portions which are removed from the prosphora are memorials, but are never used for Communion

The Wine used must be a fermented, red grape wine. Orthodox Christians tend to favour an altar wine which is somewhat sweet, although this is not necessarily a requirement.

These elements are referred to collectively as the "Gifts" or "Mysteries", both before and after the Consecration.

What is the practice of the Liturgy of Preparation?

The Priest's Service Book states that, before celebrating the Divine Liturgy, the priest must be reconciled to all men, have kept his heart from evil thoughts, and be fasting since midnight. The same rules apply to the deacon.

The beginning of the Liturgy of Preparation should be timed so that it is concluded slightly before the Reader finishes reading the Third and Sixth Hours

The priests and deacons celebrating the liturgy stand together in front of the Beautiful Gate, the holy doors of the iconostasis, they venerate the icons, and say the special entrance prayers before entering the altar (the altar is the whole area behind the iconostasis, an area which includes the Holy Table on which the elements will be placed during the Divine Liturgy). At the end of these prayers, they bow to the throne of the bishop who oversees the church, or, if it is a monastery, the abbot, to acknowledge the authority of their spiritual superiors, without whose permission they may not celebrate the divine services.

Next The priests and deacons venerate the Holy Table and put on their vestments. For each vestment, the priest first blesses it, then kisses the cross on it, and finally puts it on, at the same time reciting a verse from Scripture, appropriate to the garment which is usually from the Psalms. The deacon brings his vestments to the priest to bless, kisses the priest's hand, and likewise for each vestment kisses the cross on it and then puts it on. Whilst putting on his sticharion, he also recites the same verse as the priest has just done. Each subdeacon, reader and server vests in the same manner as a deacon, except that they do not recite anything. If a bishop who is not celebrating is present, it is he, rather than the priest, who will usually bless their vestments.

After vesting, the priest and deacon wash their hands, saying the Prayer of the Washing of Hands (Psalm 26:6-12) They then go to the Table of Oblation where the Gifts are to be prepared. This area is called "Bethlehem" and there is always an icon of the Nativity there, indicating that in preparing the bread and the wine, the priest and the deacon are preparing for Christ to come in the Bread and the Wine.

If there are several priests concelebrating, usually only one—traditionally, the most junior—celebrates the Proskomedie or Liturgy of Preparation. Others may act as assistants, but only one priest celebrates.

It has already been remarked that in the Greek traditions (Constantinople, Antioch, etc.) one large prosphoron, stamped with the seal of Christ, is used, but in the Slavic traditions there are several (usually five) smaller prosphora which are used in this service.

The priest takes a prosphoron and blesses it three times, making the sign of the cross over it with the liturgical knife, called The Spear. Then, cutting on all four sides of the square seal on the prosphoron, he removes a cube (the Lamb), taking from both layers of the loaf, and places it in the center of a golden plate, called the diskos. He then cuts the underside of the Lamb, making a cross, then turns the Lamb right side up and pierces it with the spear, saying the words from the Gospel (Jn 19 vv 34-35) concerning the piercing of Christ's side.

The deacon mixes some water with the wine to be poured in the chalice and presents it to the priest for him to bless. The deacon then pours the wine and water into the chalice, as the priest says, "Blessed be the union of Thy holy things, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen."

Next the priest takes up the second prosphoron blesses it with the spear, and cuts a large, triangular particle from it, which he places on the diskos next to the Lamb in commemoration of the Mother of God. This loaf is sometimes sealed with an icon of the Mother of God, or with her monogram.

Next, the priest takes up the third prosphoron of the Nine Ranks. From this loaf are taken smaller triangular particles in commemoration of the various ranks of saints. There are some differences between the Greek and the Slavic texts as to which particular saints are named, but the intent is that all of the saints are included. However both John the Forerunner and the Patron Saint of the parish or monastery are always named. The number nine was chosen because that is the traditional number of the ranks of angels.

These nine particles are placed to the left of the Lamb (i.e., to the priest's right, as he looks down on the diskos).

Then the priest takes up the fourth prosphoron for the Living. He takes out a larger particle in commemoration of the Patriarch , and a second larger particle in commemoration of Queen Elizabeth-Holy Scripture commands us to pray for kings and all those in authority, by praying for the Queen, we are also praying for her government. The priest also then takes out smaller particles in commemoration of others among the living. He must always commemorate the Bishop who ordained him (if he is alive), the clergy who are concelebrating with him, and any living Orthodox Christian whom he wishes. Churches and monasteries often have what are called diptychs or memorial books of the living and departed who should be commemorated at every Liturgy.

All of the particles for the living are placed in a line below the Lamb and the particles for the Theotokos and saints.

From the fifth prosphoron of the departed the priest takes a larger particle as a general memorial of the departed hierarchs, rulers and the founders of the local church or monastery. He then takes out smaller particles in commemoration of departed Orthodox Christians. He commemorates the bishop who ordained him (if he is departed) and any of the departed who he wishes to, as well as the names in the diptychs.

All of the particles for the departed are placed in a line below the particles for the living.

It is also customary for the laity to offer small prosphora in commemoration of those who are living and for those who have departed whom they would like to have prayed for during the Liturgy. These are smaller than the five prosphora used by the priest. These are handed to the priest together with their list of names, and he takes particles out (living from the top of the loaf and the departed from the bottom) and places them on the diskos. The loaves with the lists are then returned to the faithful.

Before the conclusion, any concelebrating priests who would like to make their own commemorations of the living and the departed may do so.

For the last commemoration, the priest takes out a particle for himself, saying:

"Remember, O Lord, mine unworthy self, and pardon me every transgression, whether voluntary or involuntary."

The deacon places incense in the censer and holds it up for the priest to bless. The priest blesses the incense saying the Prayer of the Censer. Next, the priest takes the Asterisk (a star shaped cover), holds it over the censer and then places it on the diskos, saying: "And the star came and stood over the place where the young child was."

He then holds each of the smaller veils over the censer and places them on the discos and the chalice, respectively, saying appropriate prayers for each.

Then he takes the larger veil, which is called the Aer, wraps it around the censer and then covers the chalice and diskos together.

Finally, he takes the censer from the deacon and censes the covered Gifts. He then says the concluding Prayer of Offering

Afterwards, the deacon performs a full censuring of the prothesis, the Holy Table, the sanctuary, the entire church and the people while he recites the following hymn and Psalm 50 quietly to himself:

In the Tomb with the body, and in Hades with the soul, in Paradise with the thief, and on the Throne with the Father and the Spirit, wast thou, O Christ, who art everywhere present and fillest all things.

At this point, which should coincide with the beginning of the end of The Hours, The Divine Liturgy starts.