

The Liturgy of the Catechumens

Objective:

- Preparations for Sanctifying the Mystery.
- The Mystery of Oblation.

Memory Verse:

“Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Revelation 14:7).

Introduction:

The catechumens are those receiving instruction in the basic doctrine of Christianity before baptism and admission to communicant membership in the Church.

In her early years, the church allowed the catechumens who were prepared to receive faith to remain inside the church till the beginning of the Liturgy. After they listen to the holy Divine Scriptures, the church prays for them so that the Lord may confirm them in faith and give them understanding to what they heard and remove from their hearts the worship of idols and make them worthy of receiving forgiveness of their sins. They were not allowed to remain inside the church during the liturgy prayers. They were commanded to leave the church since they could not understand the Divine mysteries neither could they recognize their meaning as *“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).*

St. Gregory says, “It is not appropriate neither is it good for the weak eye to look at the sun. The babes who suck milk cannot eat complete food but they should proceed gradually to what is supreme and raise themselves step by step to supreme matters. By doing this we show such people the light of Truth gradually.”

Although there are no catechumen these days in the church, the name remained and prayers are still raised for the people so that the Lord may take away from their hearts all worldly concerns, love of money and greediness which means being idol later (Ephesians 5:5) and to enlighten their hearts and confirm them in faith so that they may grow in grace and the fear of God. The signs and symbols used in this section relate to us all the events that occurred to the Lord Jesus from the day of his birth to the passions he endured.

Lesson Outline:

I. The offering of the Lamb

- ⌚ The priest goes around the altar,
- ⌚ The priest chooses the Lamb, carries it in his hands and raises it over his head, saying, “Glory and Honor, Honor and Glory...” This refers to Simon the elder who received the young child Jesus into his arms when His parents brought Him to the temple to present offering on His behalf according to Moses’ Law (Luke 2:28).
- ⌚ When Simon received the child he blessed God who revealed His Light to the Nations. The same thing is done by the priest who goes around the altar blessing and glorifying indicating the end of the Old Testament and the Coming of the New Testament with the coming of the Savior.

- ⌚ The Liturgy procession denotes the presence of the Lord Savior. That is why people bow in worship while singing “This is the day that the Lord has made...” This refers to our joy for receiving the faith of the Savior. The apostle says, “*But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: Let all the angels of God worship Him*” (Hebrews 1:6).
- ⌚ The people glorify the Lord for His mercy has been established. We should begin our work by saying: In the Name of the Trinity... The priest places the bread on a paten covered with silk corporal. He pours the wine into the chalice, mingles it with little water perfectly one third. Then he cites the prayer of Thanksgiving.

II. The Bread and Wine Prayer

- ⌚ This prayer is said in a low voice. The priest says, “We beseech and implore Thy Goodness, You lover of mankind, to reveal Your Divine Visage unto this Bread and this Chalice... Bless them and sanctify them... so that this Bread will be Your Holy Body and the mixture in this Chalice will be Your Honorable Blood. May they be for us all a source of exaltation, a balsam, a redemption for our souls, our bodies and our spirits too.”
- ⌚ Then the priest covers the Bread in the Paten with a clean corporal. He also covers the Chalice with a clean corporal. This is why this prayer is called the Covering Prayer. The covering of the Bread with a corporal, after the prayer of Thanksgiving refers to the absence of Jesus in flesh when He was hiding His glory in Egypt and in Nazareth after the people witnessed His miraculous birth.
- ⌚ The Prospherine refers to shrouding the Lord and His burial in the tomb. The Prospherine refers to the stone, and the corporal, which the priest places on the Prospherine refers to the sealing of the tomb. The priest then prays the people and servants absolution.

III. The Pauline Prayer

- ⌚ The priest and the deacons go up to the sanctuary. The priest prays the Pauline incense prayer as a preface to reading a chapter from the epistles of St. Paul the apostle. While this is read, the priest cites this prayer in a low voice. So when people are listening to the word of God, the priest is busy inside the sanctuary praying and imploring the Lord to grant him the blessing of the Word for the people who hear the word. Some of his prayers are for:
 - Those who hear to be granted knowledge and wisdom and the meaning of what they hear to be revealed.
 - Granting them a mind that is not preoccupied with anything so that they may understand how useful the holy instructions read to them are.
 - Making them deserve to be like Paul the apostle who after severely persecuting Christianity for a long time, the Lord summoned him to be a chosen vessel and a preaching apostle.

IV. The Catholic Epistle

- ⌚ A chapter of the Catholic epistle is to be read (James, Peter, Jude, or John). The priest, in both prayers of Catholic epistle and Pauline intercession implores the Lord to grant us the grace of deserving the fellowship of the writers of these epistles and that we may follow their footsteps, to be like them in struggle. He also implores the Lord to safeguard His church, which He Himself founded through their hands.

V. Acts of the Apostles

- ⌚ “Praxis” is a Greek word meaning “acts”. It is applied to the Acts of the Apostles. While reading the Acts of the Apostles, the priest prays in a low voice, and implores the Lord to help us listen to the word of God attentively and with a submissive heart and with the Spirit of prayer sharing the priest who prays for us.

VI. Synaxarium

Then the priest reads the Synaxarium, which is the commemoration of our holy fathers and martyrs. The aim is to show the image of the church fathers as example to be followed by the Christians. The life story of our holy fathers encourages us to continue their struggle.

VII. Important Hymns

- ⌚ When raising the Pauline incense, we sing the hymn –“this gold censer...” Here we notice the precise conformity between the meaning of the hymn and the occasion of placing the incense in the censer.
- ⌚ Before reading the Acts of the Apostles, we sing “Sheri mi Maria” giving peace to St. Mary.
- ⌚ After the Prayer of Reconciliation, we sing “Rejoice Mary...” where we contemplate the joy of St. Mary for being the Mother and Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

VIII. The Trisagion

This hymn is very old. It dates back to the early age of Christianity. Many writers emphasize that Joseph and Nicodemus were the first to use it when they took the body of Christ. Through this hymn we recognize Christ, His birth, His crucifixion and His resurrection from the dead. Let us, when singing it, implore the Holy God to sanctify our souls and our bodies so that we may share His resurrection. We may crucify the world in us so that we may rise in a new life.

IX. The Gospel prayer

In this prayer, the priest asks the Lord to make us worthy to hear and act according to His Holy Gospel. He also reminds us that there were many prophets and righteous people who desired to hear and see the things that we see and hear and have not seen or heard them. What we must note here is that prayer for the Gospel and those who hear the word is not confined to the priest alone, but it is the duty of the people also to “Pray for the Holy Gospel”. After the priest completes the prayer, he enters the sanctuary and goes around the altar once with the incense and the deacon before him holding the cross and the Gospel. This refers to the apostles’ preaching the Gospel all over the world carrying Christ’s cross. It also declares that Salvation was through the cross. While the priest goes around the altar, the congregation sings the psalms as the Psalms include many references and prophecies of Christ. The priest then comes out of the sanctuary with the Gospel in his hand. This is an indication of Christ coming out preaching the Good News of the kingdom of God in all Judea and Galilee. The moment the priest goes out of the Sanctuary, the deacon commands the people to stand up and listen to the Holy Gospel. Just as John the Baptist previously did for Christ preparing the way for Him and informing the people that the kingdom of God was near. The deacon also tells the people that the Gospel is about to be read so that they may stand in the fear of God to listen to the Gospel. And as John referred to the Savior by saying, “This is the lamb of God” (John 1:29) the deacon refers to the Gospel and summons people, “Stand with the fear of God. Let us hear the Holy Gospel.” Moses, in the past, warned his people not to come near the mountain, when the Lord gave him the Law so that they might not die, but in the age of grace, the deacon commands the people to stand to listen to his voice addressing them through the Gospel so that they may have everlasting life (John 5:39). When the deacon commands the congregation to stand and listen to the Gospel, he reminds

them of the voice of God calling from heaven saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him” (Matthew 17:5).

When the deacon commands the people saying, “Stand with the fear of God” they all stand indicating their submission to the Gospel, and to that who speaks to them through the Gospel.

After reading the Gospel, the priest prays for the healing of the sick, the safety of the travelers, the blessings of the winds of heaven, the fruits of the earth and the rising of the river water, the blessing of the crop, plants of the field, the salvation of people, and the safeguard of the House of God everywhere. He prays for the President, the Christians, the departed, those who offer oblations, and those who are in trouble. Then he prays for the catechumens and the church.

X. The three long prayers

A. Prayer for the peace of the church

This includes the peace of the church and the peace of the members of the church.

B. Prayer for the Fathers of the church

St. Paul asked the faithful many times to pray for him and for all the saints so that he might be able to perform his service and be given utterance in opening his mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel (Ephesians 6:18-19).

C. Prayer for our assemblies

In this prayer, the priest asks for God’s blessing to this congregation and every congregation that raise prayers to the Lord. He also implores the Lord to make of these places of congregation houses of prayers, houses of purity and houses of blessing where the faithful pray in spirit and truth, and purify and cleanse themselves of their sins and come closer to God. He also implores God to eradicate pagan worship altogether from the world. He says, “The enemies of Your holy church, O Lord, as at all times, now also humiliate. Strip their vanity; show them their weakness speedily. Bring to naught their envy, their intrigues, their madness, their wickedness and their slander, which they commit against us. O Lord, bring them all to no avail; disperse their counsel, O God, Who dispersed the council of Ahithophel.” Then the Orthodox Creed is cited. Meanwhile the priest washes his hand thrice saying the words from Psalm 51:7 “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.” This is because he will hold the Lord’s body in his hand and also the Lord’s honorable blood. The priest faces the west and dries his hands in front of the people thus warning them and drawing their attention to the fact that those who will receive the holy communion should be pure and sanctified and that he is innocent of their guilt if they dare receive the Holy Communion without being worthy of the mystery.

The completion of the three long prayers ends the Liturgy of the catechumens.