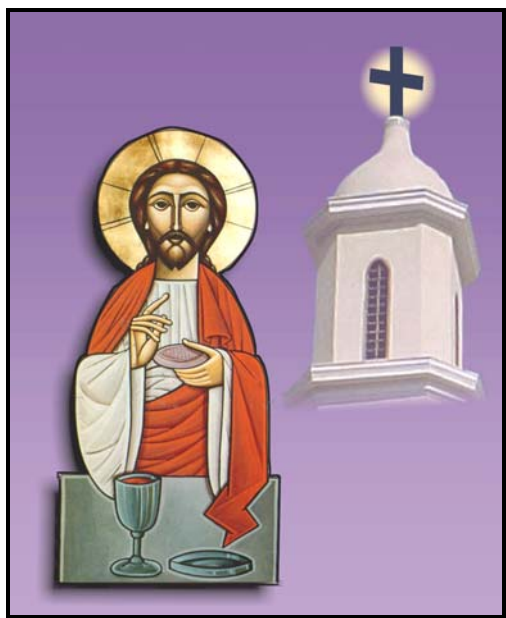


# HEAVEN ON EARTH



## *Starting Your Journey through the Coptic Orthodox Liturgy*

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### ***“I Don’t Get Anything Out of It”***

“The Coptic Orthodox Liturgy is long and dry,” complained one youth, “I don’t get anything out of coming to church on Sunday.” Sound familiar? Maybe you or someone you know has felt this way before. Despite the complaints, however, we continue coming to church because it seems like the ‘right thing to do’; or it comes with the territory of being a ‘Christian.’

Compare this attitude with the words of Saint John of Kronstadt who said, “The Divine Liturgy is truly a heavenly service on earth, in which God Himself, in a particular, immediate and most close manner is present and dwells with men, for He Himself is the invisible Celebrant of the service; He is both the Offerer and the Offering. There is on earth nothing higher, greater, more holy, than the liturgy; nothing more solemn, nothing more life-giving.”

Now, we must ask ourselves, “What is it about the Divine Liturgy that makes it so central to our Orthodox Christian faith? How does my experience compare to the Church fathers and saints who realized the importance and beauty of the liturgy?”

Understanding the importance of the Divine Liturgy and its rites is the first step in realizing the experience of the saints and making it personal.

### ***Back to Basics: What is Liturgy?***

The word “liturgy” (*leitourgia*) is derived from two Greek words: 1) *laos* (people, especially the people of God) and 2) *ergon* (act or work). Thus, a very proper translation of “liturgy” would be “the people of God performing God’s work.”

The Divine Liturgy consists of rites and rituals, which are meant to bring order to our

system of prayer. More importantly, these rites serve as a means to strengthening our relationship with the Lord as we raise our minds and hearts toward Him.

### ***Seeing the Liturgy in the “Big Picture”***

Before we develop an understanding of what happens in the Divine Liturgy, we need to understand why the liturgy is so important and why it is even worth exploring.

The Divine Liturgy is an expression of our journey toward a union with God and communion with each other. This is the essence of Christianity: to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself (*Matt. 22:34-40*).

The journey and the liturgy itself center on the Eucharist, in which we partake of the body and blood of Christ. For this reason, the Church places the icon of the Last Supper above the entrance to the sanctuary for all to see. It serves as a reminder that the Eucharist is an awesome gift from God in that He lovingly offered Himself for us, pouring out His body and blood on the Cross, in order to save us from our sins.

Saint Theophilus writes of this gift saying, “The Creator offers Himself to the creature for his enjoyment.” In partaking of the body and blood of our Lord, He abides in us and we abide in Him.

The Divine Liturgy affords us the opportunity to gather in love around the table of the Lord, as members of His one body. In Christ’s body, the earthly Church and the heavenly Church are united together. The Church teaches that, at each liturgy, the angel of the sacrifice is present. Also, the saints, while they were living on earth, could see Saint Mary and the other saints present during the Divine Liturgy.

In gathering together around the Eucharist, we are reminded of our relationship with God and His saints. We cannot enter into a deeper or more intimate union with our Savior and with each other. For this we give thanks.<sup>1</sup>

In partaking of the Eucharist during the Divine Liturgy, we also experience the forgiveness of sins. If sin separates us from God, then we need to make real God's sacrifice on the Cross which saves us. This realization comes in the life of repentance coupled with the Eucharist. Repentance is our return to God; the Eucharist is the healing medicine we need to confirm that union.

### ***Understanding What Happens***

With a clear understanding of the importance of the Divine Liturgy, we can begin learning about what happens during the liturgy and why.

A simple way to get familiar with the Divine Liturgy, in addition to regular attendance and active participation, is to read through the liturgy book at home and become familiar with the prayers and hymns, their names, and when they are said. Listening to audio recordings of the liturgy will also help you become familiar with the liturgical structure, hymns, and prayers. In spending time previewing the liturgy, you can come to church attentive and ready to participate in prayer.

### ***Understanding Why Things Happen***

After we have a sense of the structure of the Divine Liturgy, we can begin to understand *why* things happen. Every act performed by the priests, deacons, and congregation is significant and has meaning.

There are books available that explain *why* we perform these rites in the liturgy. Ask questions of the priest, deacons, and teachers. Take advantage of opportunities to stand next to someone during the liturgy who can briefly explain the rites to you as they occur. While this may interrupt your focus on prayer at first, it will make subsequent experiences of the liturgy much more fruitful.

### ***How Do I Spiritually Benefit?***

Understanding the '*what*' and the '*why*' of the liturgy are great first steps. However, one may ask, "Don't all these rites and rituals, and in fact, the liturgy itself seem impractical?" We have already discussed the importance of the Divine Liturgy in the "big picture", but we must also remember that through these rites, we strengthen our relationship with the Lord.

Many people make coming to church every Sunday a *goal*. It is not a goal, but rather it is a *means* to our union with God. We receive instructions for practical living through the readings of the Bible and from the homily. We raise our hearts and minds toward God in prayer and partake of His holy body and honored blood.

When the priest says to the congregation, "Go in peace" at the end of the liturgy, we are sent back out into the world, literally carrying Christ within us. This is the start of living the liturgy after the liturgy: we, as the people of God, performing His work of love and carrying out His mission in the world.

### ***Are You Ready for the Journey?***

The Divine Liturgy can be quite an overwhelming experience as any newcomer

can attest. It takes time to become familiar with the rites and hymns of the Church. Some may view the lack of variety in the liturgy as boring. But, the beauty of the liturgy lies in the fact that it *is* the same from week to week. Each week is an opportunity to come, learn, grow, and contemplate on something new in the Divine Liturgy.

Others may come to church expecting to get something out of it and when those needs are not satisfied, they blame everyone and everything but themselves. We need to change our attitude and come offering ourselves to God. We offer our lives to Him, for He first offered Himself to us. Our main focus in coming to church is to meet Christ, Himself.

In patience, we will realize that the effort we put into prayer, participation, and developing a personal relationship with our Lord will determine what we can get out of it through God's grace and many blessings.

The greatest rewards in life are the ones for which we struggle the most to attain. Why should our experience in the Divine Liturgy be any different? Like our father Jacob, let us wrestle with God in order to obtain His blessing. God will reveal Himself to those who sincerely seek Him and desire to know more about Him.

We pray that God opens our hearts as we begin our journey through the Divine Liturgy. In the Eucharist, we will find union with God, with the saints, and with each other. Let us not reduce the liturgy to an activity performed on Sunday. Rather, let us carry Christ with us at all times, making the liturgy a way of life and a way of love.

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'Eucharist' is derived from the Greek word '*evkharistia*', which means 'thanksgiving.'