

The Great Incensation

Before the Divine Liturgy starts the deacon or priest incenses the entire church beginning at the altar. Since the altar represents Christ he says a prayer to Christ while censuring it: Being God You were present in the tomb with your body, in Hades with your soul, in Paradise with the Thief, on the throne with the Father and the Spirit filling all things but encompassed by none. Thus we see that the censuring of the altar honors both the Holy Table and Jesus Christ. The deacon then continues censuring the Prothesis Table where the bread and wine are prepared, the Iconostasis and the congregation while saying the penitential Psalm 50. This shows that the incensation is also seen as purification to begin the service. In the Latin Rite this purification is accomplished on Sundays by sprinkling the church with Holy Water. We desire that we be purified of all evil that we may praise and worship with clean hearts focused on God.

Incense is mentioned in the Old Testament and has several meanings. Psalm 140:2 mentions that it represents our prayers rising to God. The Magi offered incense to the Christ Child because the burning of incense was a way to honor gods and kings and Jesus is indeed our King and God (Matthew 2:11). Incense is also a purification and sacrifice to God and was commanded to be offered in the Old Testament Temple every morning and evening. In Exodus God appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush and led the people out of Egypt by a pillar of cloud (Exodus 3:2 & 13:21–22). When the Tabernacle in the wilderness was dedicated God came to it and filled it with smoke and the same happened when Solomon dedicated the First Temple (Exodus 40:34 & 1 Kings 8: 10–11). So a cloud reminds us that God is present with us and the incense creates a kind of cloud in the church. The smell of the incense cannot be seen yet is present. So too God cannot be seen but is present.

The Initial Blessing

The priest begins the Liturgy by proclaiming the Kingdom of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father made the universe through the Son and Holy Spirit. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father and was incarnate of the Virgin by the will of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and sanctifies and enlightens all the believers and draws the non-believers to come to Christ. We encounter the Trinity when we meditate on creation and experience salvation. This is why all of our prayers conclude with a doxology glorifying the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Church is God's Kingdom in an incomplete form. It began with the resurrection of Christ and will be completed when He comes again in glory. In the meantime we have a foretaste of the Messianic Banquet in the Divine Liturgy and we are called to bring in new members to share in salvation and the life of God.

The Litany of Peace

The most ancient location for the petitions of the people in the Divine Liturgy is after the Sermon. Acts tells us that St. Paul preached to the presbyters of Ephesus at Miletus and then knelt and prayed with them (Acts 20:17ff). In ancient Constantinople the Litany of Peace followed by a prayer was placed at the beginning of the Three Antiphons in order to begin the procession that used to inaugurate the Liturgy for the Clergy and laity of ancient Constantinople used to process each Sunday and Feast Day from the center of the city to the Cathedral during the Antiphons. When these processions were no longer held the second Litany of Peace which was after the Sermon was dropped and the one at the beginning of the Liturgy was kept.

In I Timothy we are admonished to pray for everyone including those in the government (I

Timothy 2: 1ff). Thus the Litany of Peace (which was originally after the sermon) is worldwide in scope. It is our duty as Christians to pray for all, not just for those whom we like or love. The petitions of the priest or deacon are not the prayer; they are only directions to the congregation of what they should pray for. The actual prayer is when everyone sings, Lord, have mercy. Since this response is the actual prayer, it behooves all present to sing this response with all of their heart and to focus their mind on the petitions that they may offer their intercessions to the Lord for the stated intentions.

The Antiphons

An Antiphon is a Psalm chanted by the cantor with a response sung by the congregation. The First Antiphon always refers to the Theotokos; the Second to Christ and the Third response is the Troparion of the Sunday or the Feast. There are three antiphons to represent the three days that Christ was in the tomb thus pointing to the resurrection. Originally the Antiphons were sung while the clergy and people processed from the Forum to the cathedral. Later on these Antiphons became so popular that they were sung even when there was no procession as is the case today. For pastoral reasons today it is permitted to sing only one Antiphon so as to slightly abbreviate the Liturgy. The Psalm verses refer either to worshipping God or to the Feast being celebrated that day.

The Incarnation Hymn

The Incarnation Hymn: Only Begotten Son and Word of God... is sung at every Liturgy except a Vespers–St Basil Liturgy (4 times per year). This hymn from the 6th century summarizes our principle beliefs in Christ focusing on his incarnation, death and resurrection and ascension. By these mysteries Christ saved us. He left Heaven and became a man through the

power of the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin. Then later as an adult He laid down his life for us and died on the cross. On Easter He made his human nature immortal and rose from the tomb thus preparing for our future immortality and resurrection. The ancestor of this hymn is Philippians 2:6–11 which is an early Christian hymn that also mentions the incarnation, cross, resurrection and glorification of Christ. Such hymns about Christ go back to the beginning of Christianity and we are happy to continue this tradition of singing hymns about Christ.

The Little Entrance

During the Little Entrance or first procession the deacon carries the Gospel Book around the church accompanied by candles, the cross, the fans and incense. Christ is present in the Gospel Book and to honor it is to honor Him. That is why we kiss it after it is read; we adore Him who just spoke to us. Because Christ is present He is accompanied by candles to show that He is the Light of the World. The cross is Christ's standard or flag and the ripidia (fans) show that the angels worship Him. The incense shows that Jesus is King and God. The procession of the Gospel around the Church is a way for Christ to be with us and reminds us of how He walked around the Middle East preaching to the people and inviting them to enter the Kingdom of God. The normal Sunday Entrance Chant: Come let us worship and bow down before Christ is obviously an invitation to worship our Lord. On Feasts of Christ it is changed to reflect the occasion thus on Christmas we are told that Jesus is divine and on Ascension that He ascended etc.

The Troparia

The Troparion originated as the response to the Third Antiphon. It is always a poetic piece that refers to the Resurrection on Sundays and to the Feast on other days. To the initial

Troparion we can add those of the Saint of the day, the patron Saint or Feast of the church and finally the last one is the Kondakion or concluding Troparion that refers to the Mother of God or the Feast. Some of these Kondakia were written by St Romanos the Melodist in the 6th century. The most famous one that he wrote is for Christmas: Today the Virgin gives birth... These Troparia tell us what we are observing that day. By singing about the Feast or Saint of the day we are celebrating and not just reading an announcement. When everyone sings these Troparia then all are joining in equally in the celebration. The Troparia were not originally intended as solo pieces to be sung by the cantor alone but by the entire congregation.

The Trisagion Hymn

On most Sundays, after the Troparia and Kondakion, we sing the Trisagion – “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.” This very popular hymn was first sung by the Byzantine Bishops at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD. It quickly spread and is currently used by the Maronites, Syriacs, Armenians and Latins (only on Good Friday and in the Divine Mercy Chaplet) in addition to the Byzantine Churches. Following the teachings of St. John of Damascus we understand the hymn as an invocation to the most Holy Trinity. “Holy God” refers to the Father, the Source of the Divine Nature. “Holy Mighty One” refers to the Son, Who conquered sin and the Devil. “Holy Immortal One” refers to the Holy Spirit, Who is the Lord and Giver of Life. Because the hymn refers to the Holy Trinity we bow and make the sign of the cross during it. The Hymn is called Trisagion or “thrice holy” because the word “holy” appears three times, as in the worship of the angels before God in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6: 3). We normally sing it in English, Arabic and Greek following the directives of +Archbishop Joseph E. Tawil: Greek is the

original language of the hymn, Arabic for our old country origins and English for this country.

On several occasions we sing, All of you, who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ, Alleluia (Galatians 3:27). This hymn is sung on the original baptismal days of the Early Church: Christmas, Theophany, and Lazarus Saturday, Holy Saturday, Easter and Pentecost. It refers to the light of Christ that now covers us and that He lives in and through us.

On those occasions when we venerate the Holy Cross (September 14, 3rd Sunday of Lent, and August 1) we sing, We bow in worship before your Cross, O Master, and we give praise to your holy Resurrection. This chant draws attention to the unity of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. There is no resurrection without the cross and Jesus’ story did not end with his death on Good Friday but continues with his resurrection on Pascha.

The Prokimenon and Psalms in the Liturgy

The Prokimenon, immediately before the Epistle, is a few verses of a Psalm that was originally the entire Psalm sung with the people chanting the refrain. Psalms are sung in the Liturgy because they are the original hymns of the early Church coming from Jewish worship. The early Saints called them the “Hymns of the Holy Spirit” because they are inspired by the Holy Spirit as is the entire Bible. Currently Psalm verses are used in the Divine Liturgy for the Antiphon verses, the Prokimenon, the Alleluia Psalm and the Kinonikon before Holy Communion. These various Psalm verses refer to the “theme” or feast of the day. On Sundays everything relates to the Resurrection of Christ. On great Feasts all of the Psalm verses express the meaning of the Feast being celebrated. On weekdays they refer to the Saint of the day, i.e. Tuesday in honor of St. John the Baptist and Thursdays in honor of St. Nicholas, etc. We use the Psalms

in the Liturgy to glorify God and state our faith. They are also God's word to us as well as our words to God. Let us be attentive to the message of the "Hymns of the Holy Spirit."

The Epistle

The first biblical reading in the Divine Liturgy is the Epistle. "Epistle" means letter, so the "Epistle of St. Paul to N," means the Letter of St. Paul to N. Normally the Epistle is an exhortation to lead a Christian moral life or an explanation of the meaning of Salvation in Christ. Starting with the day after Pentecost we begin to read Romans. We then continue reading the New Testament Epistles in order, completing their reading in the course of one year. On great Feasts the Epistle always refers to the Feast. During Great Lent we read Hebrews which speaks so eloquently of the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. From Easter to Pentecost it is the universal custom in all of the Christian Churches since the 4th century to read the Acts of the Apostles. The Epistle is read by a layperson, going back to the usage of the Synagogue where any adult male was allowed to read the Scriptures. Because of the reading of the Epistle, St. Paul the Apostle and his theology is known and beloved by most Christians.

The Gospel Ceremonies

After the Epistle is finished we start to sing Alleluia. Alleluia means literally praise Yahweh (God). It is sung with several psalm verses to express our joy at the presence of Christ in our midst through the reading of the Bible, especially the Gospel. During the Alleluia the priest recites a prayer that he may be worthy to proclaim the Gospel of Salvation. He or the deacon incenses the Gospel Book to honor it, and the congregation to purify them in preparation to hear the Gospel with sincerity. The servers hold lit candles to signify that Jesus Christ is the Light of the World (John 8:

12). The children come forward for the reading of the Gospel in memory of Christ saying, Let the little children come to me (Matthew 19: 14). In the Eastern Churches the Gospel Book is always treated with the greatest respect because Christ is present in it through his Word.

The Gospel

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13: 8). Because Our Lord does not change, neither do his words. He means them as much today as He did 2,000 years ago. For this reason we always listen to the Gospel with respect and attention and humble submission to the will of God. The priest or deacon chants the Gospel with a simple intonation to lend it solemnity and to aid in our memorization of it. By humming the eison we allow the Gospel to penetrate our whole being. We stand at attention because it is Jesus, not the priest or deacon, who is speaking. After the Gospel those standing nearby kiss the Book to render love and homage to Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of St. John is read from Easter to Pentecost. St. Matthew is read from Pentecost Monday to the Feast of the Holy Cross on September 14. After the Feast of the Holy Cross St. Luke is read until the beginning of Great Lent. During Great Lent we read St. Mark and the Gospels of the Feasts always refer to the event being celebrated. Thus during the course of one year the four Gospels are read in their totality.

The Sermon

Following the reading of the Bible with the sermon goes back to Jesus Himself and the Apostles. St. Luke tells us that Jesus spoke in the Synagogue of Nazareth after the reading of the Prophet Isaiah (Luke 4: 16–30). St. Paul spoke in the Synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13: 15ff) after the reading of the Law and

the Prophets. Having the Sermon in this location insures that its content will be related to the readings of the day and not be used as the private agenda of the preacher. Normally the sermon is a reflection on the Gospel and application of it to our life today. It is based on the fact that the Word of God is living and applies just as much today as it did when it was written many years ago. It is a great responsibility of the priest to preach to his congregation, he can only do so because of his ordination and the special grace of the Holy Spirit that he received at that time. The parishioners perform a great kindness for their priest when they pray for him and ask God to guide him in his labors, especially preaching.

The Ecumenic Litany

After the sermon there follows the Ecumenic Litany with its response of the triple, Lord, have mercy. This is the most ancient location for the prayers of the people in the Divine Liturgy. Acts tells us that St. Paul preached to the presbyters of Ephesus at Miletus and then knelt and prayed with them (Acts 20: 17ff). In I Timothy we are admonished to pray for everyone including the government (I Timothy 2: 1ff). Thus the Litany of Peace (which was originally also after the sermon) and the Ecumenic Litany are worldwide in their scope. There is a place for special petitions, but these are in addition to the regular ones. It is our duty as Christians to pray for all, not just for those whom we like or love. The petitions of the priest or deacon are not the prayer; they are only directions to the congregation of what they should pray for. The actual prayer is when everyone sings, Lord, have mercy. Since this response is the actual prayer, it behooves all present to sing this response with all of their heart and to focus their mind on the petitions that they may offer their intercessions to the Lord for the stated intentions. The Ecumenic Litany concludes the Liturgy of the Word or Bible.

The Great Entrance: The Cherubic Hymn

The Great Entrance, or procession with the bread and wine to the altar, begins the Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the second part of the Divine Liturgy. This procession parallels the Little Entrance, or procession with the Gospel Book, that commences the Liturgy of the Word or Bible. During the preparations for the procession and after its completion we sing the Cherubic Hymn. This beautiful chant was first sung in our Liturgy in 574 AD. The Hymn focuses our attention on what is about to happen. During the Anaphora we will sing the Thrice Holy Hymn of the Angels (Holy, Holy, Holy Lord of Sabaoth...) before the Throne of God (Isaiah 6: 3), thus we should put aside all of our earthly concerns that we may worship God and offer our sacrifice with all of our being. We then will receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. Jesus is the King of all, and wherever He is, the holy angels are there worshipping Him and escorting Him. Thus during the Liturgy the hosts of angels are present with us, and with us they glorify the King of the Universe.

The Great Entrance: Ceremonies

While the people are singing the Cherubic Hymn the priest is preparing the Holy Table for the Eucharistic Sacrifice. First, he spreads the Antimension, which is a special cloth containing relics and blessed by the current Patriarch or diocesan bishop, on this cloth will be placed the chalice and discos. Then he says a prayer asking Christ to make him worthy to offer the Holy Oblation. He or the deacon then performs the small incensation, which consists of incensing the Holy Table, the icons of Christ and the Theotokos, the west and the people. This is done to prepare and purify the Altar and congregation for the offering of the Sacrifice. Before beginning the procession the

priest bows to the congregation and asks them to forgive him. During the procession of the bread and wine the priests and deacons mention the various intentions of that particular Divine Liturgy. After the procession the chalice and discos are placed on the Antimension and covered with the great veil or aer. It is part of the uniqueness of the Byzantine Liturgy that the Great Entrance is more solemn than in other Rites. It is considered one of the most beautiful ceremonies of the Liturgy and often depicted in iconography.

The Kiss Of Peace

After the Great Entrance is completed, and the Bread and Wine have been placed upon the Altar, we continue our preparation for the Eucharistic Sacrifice with the Kiss of Peace. The Kiss is mentioned several times in the New Testament by St. Paul (I Corinthians 16: 20, Romans 16: 16, II Corinthians 13: 12 & I Thessalonians 5: 26) and St. Peter also mentions it as well (I Peter 5: 14). We see then that the Kiss of Peace is one of the original parts of the Liturgy going back to the apostolic times. It originated in the Jewish Synagogue as a sign of the brotherhood of all the believers. When we exchange it we are admitting that we are God's family and brothers and sisters in Christ. Secondly it is a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5: 23 & 24). Thus when we are about to offer the Holy Sacrifice we must be at peace with our fellow Christians. When the Kiss of Peace is given we say: Christ is with us! He is and always will be! By these simple phrases we express our faith in the presence of Christ in the believers and the whole Church. You should only give the Kiss of Peace to two or

three people next to you. It is like a chain consisting of many links. It is not the purpose to run around the whole church and greet everyone. Rather by greeting only those who are next to us we show the brotherhood of the believers, since these persons will greet others as well. This also maintains decorum in the Church, again the purpose is not to greet everyone, but to show the brotherhood of the faithful and that we forgive each other.

The Creed

After the Kiss of Peace and immediately before the Eucharistic Prayer (Anaphora), we say the Nicene Creed. This brief prayer expresses the essence of our Faith: That we believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the One God. It is in the name of this same God that we were baptized at the orders of Jesus Himself (Matthew 28: 19). Through Baptism God lives in us, therefore when we profess our faith we are doing so from experience. We know that God is Father because Christ has revealed Him as such. We know that Christ is true God and Man because the Holy Spirit reveals Him as such. We know that the Holy Spirit exists because His love and grace are in our hearts. We guard this reality with our whole being. If anyone comes and wishes to deny the Fatherhood of God, or the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, or the divinity of the Holy Spirit, they are denying our salvation and the Trinity that lives in our hearts. We know that this cannot be! We profess, with all of those who have gone before us that God does exist and lives in Heaven and with us! The Creed as we have it now was promulgated at the 1st Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and the 1st Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. Originally it was the Creed of Caesarea in Palestine, which the Holy Fathers took as being the best one in use and therefore made it universal for all Christians. It is used today by the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran Churches, which constitute the overwhelming

majority of Christians in the World.

The Anaphora: Our Sacrifice.

We begin the Anaphora (Eucharistic Prayer) with a dialogue between the priest and people that goes back to the origins of Christianity. First, we are called to attention: Let us stand well...to offer the holy oblation in peace. This sentence points out two truths, first the people offer the Sacrifice together with the priest. The priest leads his people in prayer, that is why he faces East with them. The priest stands at the head of his community, not over it. He cannot offer the Liturgy without the faithful being present. Second, the Liturgy is a Sacrifice. The Sacrifice is our gifts, our lives and above all Christ Himself on the Cross. It is not re-enacted, but rather we are present at the original event through the power of the Holy Spirit. This Sacrificial nature of the Liturgy is expressed in the words that we use: Quran for the bread means sacrifice; the Maronites call the Liturgy the Qorbono which means sacrifice, and the Latin word Host means sacrificial victim. The people answer: A mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise. This phrase acknowledges that Christ made peace with the Father for us by his death on the Cross (Romans 5: 1). We also offer our praises and our very lives as a sacrifice to God along with Christ. This sacrificial nature of the offering is confirmed in the Words of Institution. When Christ said: This is my Body... This is my Blood (Matthew 26: 26–28); He was using the same words that a 1st century Jew used when he presented a sacrificial lamb in the Temple. The difference of course being that Christ presented not a lamb, but Himself as the Sacrifice (Hebrews 9: 12). This supreme Sacrifice is made present at each Holy and Divine Liturgy.

The Anaphora: We praise God with the Angels

Almost every church member knows by heart the Angelic Hymn: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord of Sabaoth... These words of the Angels found in the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6: 3) become ours as we praise God for his majesty and all of his Gifts to us. The greatest Gift that God the Father ever gave us was Jesus Christ and the work of Salvation that He accomplished. The Salvation that we have received from Jesus Christ is the main reason that we come together to praise and worship God. In the Anaphora (Eucharistic Prayer) the work of Christ is the main theme. We glorify God with the Angelic Hosts because we have experienced Salvation through Baptism and our Christian Life. We look forward to when the Lord will come again and perfect the Kingdom. In the meantime, we continue to glorify and praise Him. Where ever Christ is present – He is present in church through the various modes of the Icons, Gospel, priest, Holy Communion and in the hearts of the faithful according to the Second Vatican Council – the Angels are there to worship Him. So the icons of the Angels in our church are expressing the spiritual reality of their presence with us as we glorify God together. In the Liturgy the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven are united before the throne of God in praise and worship.

The Anaphora: the role of the Holy Spirit

Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1: 35), and He offered Himself on the Cross to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 9:14). Likewise during the Anaphora, when the Bread and Wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, this is also the work of the Holy Spirit. It is one of the great spiritual insights of the Eastern Churches to recognize the operation and presence of the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation. This theological insight is clearly expressed in the Anaphora when the priest asks the Father to

send down your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here offered, and make this bread the precious Body of your Christ. This happens after the people sing, we praise You, we bless You... We believe that our Heavenly Father always answers this petition because in St. Luke's Gospel Jesus said: If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11: 13)? We further believe that all of the Sacraments are likewise accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why we use passive formulas for them, i.e. The servant of God is baptized... because it is Christ Who is the true Priest, and the Holy Spirit is the true Agent of action in church. We are able to eat the Bread from Heaven (John 6: 33) because the Holy Spirit placed Christ in the womb of the Virgin, and that same Holy Spirit changes our simple bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ during the Anaphora of the Divine and Holy Liturgy.

The Litany before the Lord's Prayer

The Litany before the Lord's Prayer consists of two different Litanies. To the first we answer, Lord, have mercy, and to the second we respond, Grant this, O Lord. The first Litany prays for the renewal of the grace of Pentecost. We ask God the Father to send us the grace of the Holy Spirit because He has received our Sacrifice (Christ) on the Heavenly Altar. The Sacred Body and Blood are the Vehicle of this grace because the human nature of Christ is anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit due to His baptism (Mark 1: 10). In the second Litany we ask God for a peaceful and sinless life. We ask for an Angel of Peace (guardian angel) to help us in staying free from sin, and we ask for God's forgiveness of our sins. The priest's prayer at the end of the Litany ties both litanies together by asking God to make us worthy of receiving Holy Communion for the purpose of having our sins

forgiven and communion in the Holy Spirit. This Pneumatological emphasis on the Body and Blood of Christ is part of our unique understanding of the meaning of Holy Communion as Byzantine Melkites.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is inserted at this point in the Divine Liturgy in order to be a collective prayer in preparation for Holy Communion. The early Saints of the Church understood daily bread as including not only the food for our bodies, but for our souls as well. The sacred Body and Blood of Christ nourish both our soul and body in preparation for eternal life. Jesus said quite plainly in St. John's Gospel, I am the Bread of Life (John 6: 35). He also said, I am the living Bread that came down from Heaven; whoever eats this Bread will live forever; and the Bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world (John 6: 51). There is also an early Christian translation of the Lord's Prayer that rendered daily bread as divine bread. So during the Lord's Prayer we pray together that we may receive Holy Communion and that the fullness of the Lord's Kingdom will come. Our reception of the Body and Blood of Christ is already a foretaste of the Messianic Banquet in the Age to Come (Revelations Chaps. 19–22).

The Prayer after the Our Father

This is the second presbyteral prayer in preparation for Holy Communion. It is perhaps the most ancient preparatory prayer, even predating St. John Chrysostom (d. 407 AD). This prayer is important because it mentions that Jesus goes forth from the church with us. When we receive Holy Communion, the Body and Blood of Christ become part of our own body by being digested and absorbed into our system. Christ truly becomes physically part of us as well as spiritually part of us. Thus, He leaves the Church with us to be with us in

whatever we may do or need. Therefore, we ask Him to protect us as we travel and heal us if we are sick. St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110 AD) calls Holy Communion the Medicine of Immortality echoing the words of Christ in St. John's Gospel, Whoever eats this Bread will live forever (John 6: 58). The Holy Fathers even said that when Jesus comes back to raise our bodies from the dead, He will do so looking for His own Body which has become part of us in Holy Communion.

The Rite of Holy Communion: The Fraction of the Bread

When the priest says, Holy Things to the Holy, the Rite of the reception of Holy Communion begins. The first action that he performs is to break the Lamb (short for Lamb of God) into four pieces. This Lamb is a large piece of Bread with a Cross imprinted on it and the Greek words for: Jesus Christ Conquers (IC XC NIKA). This symbol is often found several places in a church including the altar. One piece of the Lamb is placed in the chalice, the priest receives the second for Holy Communion, and the other two are used for the other clergy or the congregation. This act of breaking the Lamb goes back to the early Church when one large loaf of bread was used for the Liturgy. This loaf was not cut ahead of time, but broken apart by the deacons at Communion time. Now we cut the bread at the Prothesis before the Liturgy starts, only the Lamb is now broken. The bread from which the particles are cut is usually only one loaf, if possible, and placed on only one discos, if possible. This is done to show the unity of the Church. St. Paul says: The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (I Corinthians 10:16 & 17). Our Byzantine way of preparing the bread for Holy Communion is much closer to the early Church than that of the Western Church which uses

round hosts that were never part of the same loaf of bread. If possible only one chalice is used for the Liturgy also, again to show the unity of the Church. If more chalices are needed they are limited in number and frequently the sacred Blood is only poured into them from one large chalice at this time.

The Rite of Holy Communion: The Prepatory Prayers

After the singing of the Kinonikon, which is a Psalm verse (Praise the Lord... in honor of the resurrection of Christ), everyone says together the Prayers before Holy Communion. These prayers were originally said only by the clergy. They started to be said by the laity first in the Slavic Byzantine Churches, and since 1968 they have been said by the laity in the Melkite Church as well. The first prayer, I believe Lord and profess... tells us how to approach Holy Communion. First, we must believe that Christ is the Son of the Living God and He is our Savior. In this we echo the faith of St. Peter (Matthew 16:16). Second, we admit that we are sinners, just as St. Paul did (I Timothy 1:15). Third, we profess that the Bread and Wine are truly the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ as He stated at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26–30). Finally, we admit that only God can make us worthy to receive Holy Communion. To partake of the Body and Blood of Christ is a great gift and mercy from God. We never can be worthy to receive it on our own merit.

The Rite of Holy Communion: Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ

Melkites receive Holy Communion by the priest dipping the sacred Body in the chalice. This is called intinction. We have only done it this way for about 120 years. Previously, the sacred Body was placed in the chalice and the priest used a spoon to communicate the faithful, as is still done in the Slavic Byzantine Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Intinction was first used in Aleppo, Syria due to a plague. It was

remarked that more people approached to receive Holy Communion with the new method, so other Eparchies followed their example. It is good to note that the movement for frequent reception of Holy Communion started in the Melkite Church about 20 years before it started in Latin Church with Pope Saint Pius X. Also, as Melkite Catholics we always receive both the Bread and Wine, and not just the Bread as is frequently the case in the Western Churches. Christ instituted the Sacrament in two parts, bread and wine, not just one or the other. Normally during Holy Communion we sing the hymn, Make me this day... This piece comes from the Holy Thursday Vespers–Liturgy, and was first introduced there in 573 AD. It restates the themes of the Communion Prayers that we discussed previously, but in a more poetic fashion. It also poignantly recalls the cry of the Good Thief, Remember me in your kingdom (Luke 23:42). This simple phrase once again reminds us that we are utterly dependent upon the mercy of God to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Litany and Prayer of Thanksgiving After Communion

The word Mystery is very important in our prayers. It reminds us that what is taking place in the Liturgy defies human logic. Also, that it takes place by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, which also defies human reasoning. In the Thanksgiving Litany and Prayer after Holy Communion this term is used reminding us that we have done something and received Someone (Christ) because of the power and mercy of God. We just received the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Why Christ would be willing to give Himself to us is beyond our comprehension, yet He does it. How his human Body can be present in churches all over the world at the same time is explained only by referring to the ineffable power of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we acknowledge that only

God made us worthy to partake of this great Mystery. In the face of all of this wonder, that bursts the bonds of our limited understanding, we can only thank and praise the Lord for his great love and mercy for us.

The Ambon Prayer

O Lord who bless those who bless You... in this prayer, originally read from the middle of the church, the priest invokes the blessing of God first upon the Church and then upon the whole world. We ask God to safeguard the fullness of the Church; we do not want to lose church members or the truths of salvation. We remember those who love the beauty of the house of God because it takes money and work to build and maintain the edifices that we use for our various church activities. We ask for peace for the Church and the whole world. When we use this word peace in the Church, we understand first of all not the absence of hostilities, but the peace of soul from Christ. Peace is a gift of Christ (John 14:27), and therefore can only come from Him. Indeed we spend the entire Liturgy mentioning this peace. In peace let us pray to the Lord... Peace be to all. Let us go forth in peace. When the Liturgy ends it is our job to bring the peace of Christ into the world around us. May we do so with His help.

The Dismissal

There are several blessings that end the prayers of the Liturgy. Originally these blessings were reserved for the servers and singers after the people received the antidoron. The kissing of the Cross and receiving the Blessed Bread (Antidoron) is very important. The people approach the priest to receive a personal blessing by kissing the Cross. This custom of the personal blessing goes back to Jesus. After the Feeding of the Five Thousand the Gospel tells us that Jesus dismissed the crowd while the Apostles left in

a boat (Matthew 14:22). This seems to refer to a personal blessing for those present, and not just a general one for all. Jesus also dismissed the crowds in the Feeding of the Four Thousand (Matthew 15: 39). More important the Gospel tells us that Jesus laid his hands on the children and prayed, and then went away (Matthew 19: 13–15). So it seems that giving a personal blessing to the members of the congregation as they leave goes back to the Lord. In our Church it gives the priest a chance to personally greet and bless his flock. The Antidoron is a remnant of the ancient Agapé or Love Feast of the Church. We all share the Sacred Meal of the Body of Christ together, and then we share together the beginning of our earthly meal by sharing in bread that has received a simple blessing. One of the realities of Christian Life is that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. By sharing this bread together at the end of the Liturgy we show that we are God's Family.

Conclusion

When we leave the church we do so to bring Christ, who is in our hearts, into a world that needs Him desperately. This is our evangelical mission. If you do not have the words to speak to others about Christ let Him shine through to others by your love, good works and peace of mind.