THE DIVINE LITURGY: A BIBLE STUDY

The Divine Liturgy is the heart of Orthodox Christian worship. It is not merely a service we attend; it is the eternal worship of heaven made present on earth, the mystical supper of the Lamb, and the foretaste of the Kingdom of God. This study will explore its meaning, its ancient roots, and its development through the centuries, so that we may understand more deeply what we are doing when we "go to church."

PART I: WHAT IS THE DIVINE LITURGY?

A. The Meaning of the Word "Liturgy"

The word **"liturgy"** comes from the Greek *leitourgia* (λειτουργία), which literally means **"the common work"** or **"a public service"**. In ancient Greece, it referred to a public duty performed by a citizen for the good of the community. In the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), the word was used to describe the **temple rituals of ancient Israel**.

In the Christian Church, the Divine Liturgy means **the common work of God done by the people of God**. It is not something we observe passively; it is something we *do* together. It is the action of the whole Church—the Body of Christ—offering itself to God through Christ and receiving His life in return.

B. The Two Parts of the Divine Liturgy

The Divine Liturgy has two main parts, each with its own origin and purpose:

1. The Liturgy of the Word (Synaxis)

This part has its origin in the **synagogue gatherings of the Old Testament**, where the people gathered for prayer, scriptural study, preaching, and the contemplation of the Word of God. In the early Church, this was called the *Synaxis* (gathering). It consists of:

- Readings from the Epistles and the Gospel
- The chanting of Psalms and hymns
- The homily (sermon) that breaks open the Word of God

In the early Church, this part of the Liturgy was open to all—believers, catechumens, and even non-Christians. For this reason, it came to be called the **"Liturgy of the Catechumens"**.

2. The Liturgy of the Eucharist (Anaphora)

This part 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)**. It consists of:

- The offering of bread and wine
- The great prayer of thanksgiving (*Anaphora*)
- The consecration of the Gifts by the Holy Spirit (*Epiclesis*)
- The reception of Holy Communion

In the early Church, this part was reserved only for the baptized faithful. For this reason, it came to be called the **"Liturgy of the Faithful"**.

The two parts are not separate services; they are one seamless act of worship. The Liturgy of the Word prepares us for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist fulfills what was proclaimed in the Word.

PART II: THE DIVINE LITURGY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. The Temple Worship and Priesthood

The worship of the Old Testament was centered on the **Temple in Jerusalem**, where the priests offered sacrifices according to the Mosaic Law. The entire system of sacrifices—the burnt offerings, the sin offerings, the peace offerings—was a divine institution given by God to prepare His people for the coming of the Messiah.

The Divine Liturgy is not a rejection of this Old Testament worship but its **fulfillment and "christening"**—the Old Testament liturgical life has been taken up, transformed, and brought to perfection in Christ.

Key Scripture: Hebrews 9:11-14

"But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."

Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood. He is both the High Priest and the sacrifice, offering Himself once for all. The Divine Liturgy makes this one perfect sacrifice present to us.

B. The Passover and the Exodus

The most important Old Testament event prefiguring the Divine Liturgy is the **Passover (Pascha)**. The Passover was the sacrifice of a spotless lamb, the application of its blood on the doorposts, and the meal eaten in haste as the people of God were delivered from slavery in Egypt.

The Divine Liturgy is the **fulfillment of the Passover**. Christ is the true Paschal Lamb—"our Passover Lamb, who has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Eucharist is the New Passover

meal, in which we are delivered not from the slavery of Egypt but from the slavery of sin and death.

Key Scripture: Luke 22:14-20

"When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, 'With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer...' And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.'"

The Lord's Supper was a Passover meal, and it transformed the ancient feast into the New Covenant meal of the Church.

C. The Synagogue Worship and the Word

The Liturgy of the Word finds its roots in the **synagogue worship** of the Old Testament. In the synagogues, the people gathered for prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, and the exposition of the Word of God.

The early Christians, who were Jews, continued this pattern of worship but now read the Scriptures in the light of Christ. The Old Testament prayers, Psalms, and prophecies are sung and read, but now they are understood as pointing to Jesus.

PART III: THE DIVINE LITURGY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. The Institution of the Eucharist

The Divine Liturgy has its origins in the **Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, instituted by the Lord Himself**. At the Last Supper, on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus took bread and wine and gave them to His disciples with the command: *"Do this in remembrance of Me"* (Luke 22:19).

The Institution of the Eucharist is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels and by the Apostle Paul:

Matthew 26:26-28

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.'"

Mark 14:22-24 (parallel)
Luke 22:19-20 (parallel)

1 Corinthians 11:23-25

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'"

St. Paul's account is the **earliest written account** of the institution of the Eucharist in the New Testament, written before the Gospels.

B. The Breaking of Bread in the Early Church

The Apostles and the early Christians faithfully obeyed the Lord's command. The Book of Acts records that the early Church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Acts 2:46-47

"So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people."

The "breaking of bread" was the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The Divine Liturgy was **already being practiced right after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost**—long before the New Testament writings were completed.

This is a crucial point: **the Church celebrated the Liturgy before it had a written New Testament.** The Liturgy is not an invention of later centuries; it is the living tradition of the Apostles, passed down through the Church from the very beginning.

C. The Meaning of the Eucharist in the New Testament

The New Testament teaches that in the Eucharist, the bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ:

1 Corinthians 10:16

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?"

1 Corinthians 11:27-29

"Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord... For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."

The Apostle Paul warns that those who receive the Eucharist carelessly are guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord. This is a very strong affirmation that the bread and wine are not mere symbols but truly the Body and Blood of Christ.

John 6:53-56

"Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.'"

These words of Christ are the foundation of the Church's belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

PART IV: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIVINE LITURGY THROUGH THE CENTURIES

A. The Earliest Liturgies

In the earliest days of the Church, the Liturgy was simpler than it is today. The early Christians gathered for the "breaking of bread" in homes, in upper rooms, and in the catacombs. The service consisted of prayers, hymns, Scripture readings, and the Eucharistic prayer, but it had not yet been written down in a fixed form.

The Divine Liturgy was **officiated long before the beginning of the writings of the New Testament**. Its essential structure—the Liturgy of the Word followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist—was established from the very beginning.

B. The Liturgy of St. James

The oldest complete liturgical text that we have is the **Liturgy of St. James**, traditionally ascribed to St. James, the Brother of the Lord and first Bishop of Jerusalem. This Liturgy was the primary Eucharistic liturgy of the Church of Jerusalem until the 12th century. Its anaphora (Eucharistic prayer) goes back to the end of the fourth century.

Today, the Liturgy of St. James is celebrated only once a year, on October 23 (the feast of St. James), in some places.

C. The Liturgies of St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom

In the **fourth century**, the Eucharistic prayers of the two most prominent liturgies of the Eastern Church were substantially formulated:

1. The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great

This is the older of the two liturgies. St. Basil the Great (c. 330-379) composed a longer, more elaborate Eucharistic prayer that is still used today. It is celebrated only ten times a year:

- The five Sundays of Great Lent
- Holy Thursday
- Holy Saturday
- The Eve of Nativity and Theophany
- The feast of St. Basil (January 1)

2. The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), the great Archbishop of Constantinople, composed a **shorter form** of the Liturgy from the Basilian Liturgy. This is the Liturgy used on most days of the year.

The tradition of the Church says that St. John Chrysostom composed this shorter form out of concern for human weakness. Over time, his Liturgy became the main Liturgy of the Byzantine Rite, eventually displacing the Basilian Liturgy for most Sundays and feast days.

D. The Structure Takes Its Final Form

While the Eucharistic prayers of these liturgies were formulated in the 4th and 5th centuries, the liturgies as we know them today—with all their additions—probably received their **present form after the ninth century**.

Some of the later additions include:

- The **Proskomide (or Prothesis)** – the service of preparation, where the priest prepares the bread and wine before the Liturgy begins
- The **Enarxis** – the opening rites of the Liturgy
- The prayers of thanksgiving and dismissal at the end

The original simple structure of the Liturgy—Synaxis (Liturgy of the Word) followed by Anaphora (Liturgy of the Eucharist)—was thus expanded into a more elaborate service.

PART V: KEY SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES IN THE DIVINE LITURGY

A. The Consecration

The words of institution are taken directly from Scripture:

"Take, eat; this is My body... Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28).

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you..." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

B. The Epiclesis (Invocation of the Holy Spirit)

The Orthodox Church teaches that the consecration of the Gifts is accomplished by the descent of the Holy Spirit, not merely by the recitation of the words of institution. This is based on the Lord's promise:

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things" (John 14:26).

C. The Cry of the Cherubim

The Liturgy echoes the heavenly worship described in the Book of Revelation:

"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8).

This is sung during the Eucharistic prayer, joining the worship of the Church on earth with the worship of heaven.

D. The Lord's Prayer

The Liturgy concludes with the prayer that Christ Himself taught us:

"Our Father, who art in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9-13).

PART VI: THE DIVINE LITURGY AND THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

A. The Liturgy Is the Source of Doctrine

The living experience of the sacramental and liturgical life is a **primary source of Christian doctrine**. In the Liturgy, the Bible and Holy Tradition come alive and are given to the living experience of the Christian people.

According to the common opinion of the Orthodox Church, the liturgical texts—the hymns, blessings, prayers, symbols, and rituals—contain no formal errors or deformations of the Christian faith and can be trusted to reveal the genuine doctrine of the Orthodox Church.

B. The Liturgy Is the Foretaste of the Kingdom

The Divine Liturgy is always **resurrectional in spirit**. It is the manifestation to God's people of the Risen Christ, an outpouring of the life-creating Spirit, and communion with God the Father. It is never mournful or penitential, but is always the expression and experience of the **eternal life of the Kingdom of the Blessed Trinity**.

C. The Liturgy Is the Center of Christian Life

The Divine Liturgy is the most significant Christian service, the center of the inspiration of the first Christians in their communion with God and with one another. It is the “common work” of the people of God, the action in which we participate in the voluntary self-offering of Christ to the Father. Through the Liturgy, we receive Holy Communion with God.

CONCLUSION

The Divine Liturgy is not a human invention. It is the continuation of the worship that God established in the Old Testament, brought to fulfillment in the New Testament, and preserved and developed in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

When we gather for the Divine Liturgy, we are not merely attending a service; we are **entering into the eternal worship of heaven**. We stand before the throne of God with the angels and the saints. We hear the Word of God proclaimed. We offer ourselves and our lives to God. And we receive the Body and Blood of Christ—the medicine of immortality, the food for the journey, the foretaste of the Kingdom to come.

As St. John Chrysostom said:

"Let us not be slack in going to the Divine Liturgy, for this is the work of God. This is the greatest comfort of our life."

SCRIPTURE SUMMARY

Topic	Key Scriptures
Institution of the Eucharist	Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25
Real Presence	John 6:53-56; 1 Corinthians 10:16
The New Covenant	Hebrews 9:11-14
Christ as High Priest	Hebrews 4:14-16; Hebrews 5:1-10
Worship in Spirit and Truth	John 4:23-24
Worship with Angels	Revelation 4:8-11
Our Participation in Christ's Sacrifice	Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5, 9

Topic	Key Scriptures
The Lord's Prayer	Matthew 6:9-13

Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen. ☦