

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 102

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 10: The Cycles of Prayer in the Church

(The Faith, Chapter 15)

From the very beginning of the Church, the Christians inherited from their Hebrew roots a cycle and habit of daily liturgical prayer.

Acts 2:42 The early Church, in the very beginning, from the Day of Pentecost “continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of the Bread, **and in prayers.**”

Acts 2:46 They continued to gather “**daily** with one accord **in the temple.**”

Acts 3:1 “Now Peter and John went up together to the temple **at the hour of prayer**, the **ninth** hour.”

The New Testament Church inherited from the Hebrew Old Testament liturgical practice the **manner of sanctifying time**, (making the entire day holy), by a constant cycle of regular hours of prayers.

In the Old Testament, the day began with the evening. See **Genesis 1:5** - “And the *evening* and the morning were the first day.” Hebrews regarded the beginning of the new day to start with sunset. The Early Church (to this day) continues this practice. (That is why Christmas Eve is the EVENING BEFORE Christmas morning, NOT the sunset on the 25th.)

The Cycle of Daily Prayer

In the Orthodox Church, the **first set of prayers** for the 24-hour night-day cycle of prayer are the Vespers evening prayers (said at the setting of the sun).

6pm--**Vespers** (candles are lit and incense is offered to God at the setting of the sun)

9pm--**Compline** (the “after vespers” prayers)

Midnight—**Nocturns** (the “midnight office”)

3am—**Matins** (also called “orthos” in Greek)

7am—**1st Hour** (The first hour of day-time on a Roman sun dial.) (Christ was before Pilate.)

9am—**3rd Hour** (When the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. And, Christ’s judgement by Pilate.)

Noon- **6th Hour** (When Christ was hanging upon the Cross.)

3pm—**9th Hour** (When Christ died upon the Cross.)

The Prophet Malachi foretold of the future when the Gentiles would sanctify the hours of the day by prayer and incense.

Malachi 1:11 “For from **the rising of the sun, even to its going down,** My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, And a pure offering; For My name shall be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.”

This prophecy has been fulfilled in the New Testament Church.

The **Divine Liturgy** is NOT part of the Daily Cycle of Prayers, though it usually is sung after the Sixth Hour has been read in church. In the Divine Liturgy, we reach beyond time into eternity, and stand spiritually before the Throne of God.

The Usage of the Psalms (“The Psalter”)

In the Old Testament worship, special Psalms were sung by the Jews at appointed hours. The Psalms were the Hymn Book of the Old Testament Church, and the Early Church (the Orthodox Catholic Church) inherited and continued this practice. To this present day, Orthodox worship uses the Psalms as its **primary text** and source of liturgical hymns. The basic portion of all the daily prayer services is the chanting of specific Psalms. Other hymns and litanies are added in—before and after the Psalms—but in all Orthodox Divine Services, the Psalms are the main component...the “ribs”...the structure of the worship service.

The Orthodox Church divided up the Psalter into twenty sections, known as “kathismata”. (This word means “sitting down”—worshippers were allowed to sit during the long chanting of the sections of the Old Testament Psalms.) If done properly and completely, an Orthodox monastery (or large cathedral parish) will chant the entire Book of Psalms during these Daily Services and Hours ONCE each week, and TWICE each week during Great Lent. No wonder the monks, from earliest days, are supposed to **memorize** the ENTIRE book of Psalms. The Orthodox Church LOVES the Psalms.

Note: the Orthodox Psalter has 151 Psalms, not 150 (as in Protestant translations.)

The Weekly Cycle:

Sunday: The Day of Resurrection

Monday: Dedicated to remembering the Holy Angels.

Tuesday: Dedicated to the memory of St. John the Baptist and all the Prophets.

Wednesday: Remembers the Betrayal of Jesus (Judas going to the Jews to make the deal.)

Therefore: this is a strict FASTING day.

Thursday: Dedicated to the Apostles and St. Nicholas.

Friday: Dedicated to Christ's Passion, Crucifixion, and Burial. A strict FASTING day.

Saturday: (The old Sabbath day of rest, on which Christ lay "resting in His tomb." On this Day we remember all the Departed: the martyrs and our departed ones. We hold special memorial liturgies and commemorate our beloved Departed in the LORD.)

The Jews in the time of the Apostles **fasted twice a week:** on Mondays and Thursdays.

The Early Church chose to be different, and kept a regular fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.

See 1st/2nd Century ancient text: *The Didache: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles to the Nations:*

8:1 And let not your fastings be with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and the fifth day of the week;

8:2 but do ye keep your fast on the **fourth** and on the preparation (the **sixth**) day.

The Hymn Book used throughout the week is the "**Octoechos**", or, **Book of Eight Tones**.

The Yearly Cycle (of fixed date feasts):

Various Feasts and Fasts fall on specific dates. There are **Twelve Great Feasts** which tell the Gospel Story of Christ—the Good News (*evangelion*). Pascha—the Feast of Feasts—is NOT one of the Twelve Great Feasts, but stands ABOVE all other celebrations in the Church.

The Church Year begins with September 1st (not January, as does the modern secular calendar.)

An important Hymn Book used throughout the year is the **Festal Menaion**: which has the special texts for fixed-date festal (FEAST) services, such as Christmas (Dec. 25th), Theophany (Jan. 6th), Transfiguration (Aug. 6th), etc.

A second important Hymn Book used throughout the year is the twelve-volume set of books known as the **Menaion**—one book for **each month of the year**. It has the special variable texts for the feast day services of martyrs and saints for every day of the year.

GREAT FEASTS AND FASTS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH*(from Faith of our Fathers, Stan Carlson and V. Rev. Leonid Soroka, 1968, p. 154)*

- *NATIVITY OF THE VIRGIN MARY .. September 8 (September 21)
- *ELEVATION OF THE HOLY CROSS..September 14 (September 27)
- CHRISTMAS LENT—A forty-day Lenten period preceding Christmas—
November 15-December 25 (November 28-January 7)
- *PRESENTATION TO THE TEMPLE OF
THE VIRGIN MARY November 21 (December 4)
- *CHRISTMAS—
NATIVITY OF THE SAVIOUR December 25 (January 7)
- DAY BEFORE EPIPHANY January 5 (January 18)
- *EPIPHANY—BAPTISM OF JESUS January 6 (January 19)
(Manifestation of the Most Holy Trinity
Great Blessing of Waters)
- *MEETING OF JESUS BY ST. SIMEON February 2 (February 15)
(Fortieth Day After the Birth of Christ
Purification—Blessing of Candles)
- *ANNUNCIATION OF THE VIRGIN MARY ... March 25 (April 7)
- GREAT LENT—A moveable Lenten period observed for 7 weeks (48
days) preceding Easter
- *PALM SUNDAY—Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem. Sunday before Easter
- **EASTER—The Feast of Feasts—Falls on the Sunday following the Spring
full moon
- *ASCENSION—Forty days after Easter. Always falls on a Thursday
- *PENTECOST—Fifty days after Easter. Always falls on a Sunday
- ST. PETER'S LENT—A moveable Lenten period preceding St. Peter and
Paul's Day.
- ST. PETER AND PAUL'S DAY June 29 (July 12)
- ASSUMPTION LENT—A fifteen-day Lenten period preceding the AS-
SUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY
- *TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD August 6 (August 19)
- *ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY....August 15 (August 28)
- DAY OF ST. JOHN'S MARTYRDOM
(Beheading of John the Baptist) August 29 (September 11)

Dates shown first denote Julian calendar date—Dates
in parentheses denote Gregorian calendar date.

**Greatest Festival of the Eastern Orthodox Church year.

*One of the Twelve Most Important Orthodox Feast Days.

Every Wednesday and Friday of the year—with specified exceptions—
are fast days.

The Paschal Cycle

The Feast of Pascha (“Easter”) moves; it is not fixed to one date.

The date of Pascha varies from year to year, depending upon the vernal equinox and upon Jewish Passover (which moves around from year to year).

This Paschal Cycle of services includes all the weeks of Great Lent, Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Pascha, the Ascension, the days before Pentecost, and the Feast of Pentecost itself.

All the Great Lenten texts and hymns are found in the wonderful Hymn Book known as the **Lenten Triodion**.

Finally, all the texts and hymns for the Feast of Pascha, and up through Pentecost, are found in the Hymn Book known as the **Pentecostarion**.

Personal Prayer Rule and Unceasing Prayer

In addition to the above Cycles of Prayer, with all the Psalmody and liturgical services, the Orthodox Christian also keeps his or her own daily **Private Rule of Prayer**. Daily Morning and Evening Prayers are found in any standard Orthodox Daily Prayer Book. The *Didache* states that one should pray the Lord’s Prayer “three times in the day.” (*Didache* 8:11) There are quite a few prayers in the Daily Prayer Book, and this often seems daunting to the beginner. Therefore, one should consult his spiritual father for guidance as to how to practically shorten the rule temporarily in order to “grow” a meaningful and doable daily Prayer Rule.

Personal **Unceasing Prayer** is required by Holy Scripture—1st Thessalonians 5:17. Since the Early Church era, the Orthodox Christians have practiced the “Prayer of the Heart”—the Jesus Prayer—saying constantly: “**O LORD Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**” This is to be said mindfully to Jesus, with all one’s heart, not mindlessly. It IS a prayerful constant conversing with God, not a mind-numbing mantra.