

## The Eucharist: Its Structure

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Despite some talk about our “timeless unchanged Liturgy,” the Orthodox Divine Liturgy actually has undergone a number of changes since the days of the apostles, and even from the days of the second century. This is a good thing, for everything that lives changes and grows and develops. The prayers to the Babylonian god Marduk have not changed in rather a while, for devotion to Marduk is stone dead; the prayers to the God of the Christians have changed over time, for devotion to our God remains strong. The changes in the Liturgy therefore witness to its dynamic life and its importance to believers.

As mentioned in [our previous article](#), in the days of the apostles the Eucharistic partaking of Bread and Wine occurred as the culmination of a full supper on Sunday evening, as witnessed to by the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. At the Lord’s Supper in Corinth, “each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk” (1 Cor. 11:21). Paul had some words of rebuke for this scandalous situation, but his words at least reveal that the Bread and Wine were part of an actual meal in the mid-first century. But by the time of St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (who was martyred about 107 A.D.), the meal (now called an agape, or “love feast”) was held separately from the actual Eucharist. We know this because Ignatius wrote to the church at Smyrna that they should consider as valid only “a Eucharist” at which the bishop or his delegate presided, and that furthermore, apart from the approval of the bishop, it was “not lawful either to baptize or to hold an agape.” Clearly the agape had by this time been separated from the Eucharist, for technical terms had already been coined for both.

We also know a bit about what the Eucharistic service was like. St. Justin the Philosopher (aka “Justin Martyr”) wrote about it a few decades after the time of St. Ignatius, in about 155 A.D. In his day, people were slandering the Christians as cannibals, saying that we ate babies at our secret services. They also accused us of incestuous orgies—all this Christian talk about “the Kiss” and “the brothers and the sisters.” In response, Justin wrote his Apology (or “defense”), in which he broke with Christian tradition by describing for outsiders what went on in the Christian worship. He did this with a kind of studied naivety, as if saying, “Here’s what we actually do. Is there some sort of problem with any of this?”

Thus in several chapters, he describes the Christian’s weekly worship as consisting of:

1. “The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets” are read “for as long as time permits.”
2. The president of the assembly “verbally instructs” the congregation and “exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”
3. Prayers of intercession are offered “for all others in every place.”
4. The Christians “salute one another with a kiss.” (Note, O pagan: no orgy involved.)
5. “Bread and a cup of wine mixed with water” are “brought to the president of the brethren.”
6. The president “offers prayers and thanksgivings” over the bread and cup “according to his ability.”
7. The people respond to the prayer by saying “Amen” which, as Justin says, means “so be it.”
8. The people partake of the bread and the cup. Justin explains at length that this food which is called “the Eucharist” is “the flesh and blood of Jesus,” who told us to do this, calling the bread His body and the cup His blood. (Note again, O pagan: no cannibalism.)
9. “To those who were absent a portion is sent by the deacons.”

Justin further adds that all of this was done on Sunday, “the day on which we all hold our common assembly.”

One can immediately see that the basic structure of the Eucharist as described by St. Justin in the middle of the second century is that of our Orthodox Divine Liturgy today. All of the churches in both the east and the west conformed to this basic pattern, though, of course, the words of the prayers varied. Indeed, each pastor/ bishop made up his own thanksgiving prayer (or “anaphora”) in those early years, with standardization and use of a written model coming only much later. The “unchanging” part of our Liturgy is found in this basic structure, and even here certain additions were made, especially in the east.

One of these additions was the insertion at the beginning of the service of what we today call “the Antiphons.” These were psalms with a repeated refrain sung as the congregation processed through the town on the way to church. Obviously such a public display of faith could only take place after the Empire was well on its way to being Christianized. But these parades (“stations” they were called, because the parade would stop several times for prayer) were immensely popular, and people wanted to sing the songs even on days when there was no “station” or parade. Thus these psalms and prayers found their way into the beginning of the Liturgy.

Another addition was that of the Trisagion hymn, which was originally one of these songs. The Trisagion itself (“Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal, have mercy on us”) was the refrain for the psalm, and the whole psalm with the refrain was used as an entry chant. The psalm eventually fell out (leaving only the “Glory...Now and ever” as a vestige), leaving the repeated refrain standing by itself. But people liked singing this hymn, with or without the psalm, and it secured a place in the Liturgy, after the Antiphons.

Another addition was that of the Nicene Creed. Originally the Creed was only used at baptisms, as the candidate’s confession of faith. But in the sixth century, the monophysite bishop of Constantinople inserted it into the Liturgy as a kind of ecclesiastical manoeuvre to please the Emperor. None of his successors wanted to be known as the bishop who removed the venerable Creed from the Liturgy, and so the Creed remained embedded there. Over the succeeding centuries, it has proved to be a fortunate insertion, and perhaps shows that God can use even ecclesiastical maneuvering for His purposes.

Other parts of the Liturgy have been fancied up with the years. The simple bringing to the president of the bread and wine has become the beautiful and stately “Great Entrance.” Obviously the vestments the clergy wear have been brocaded and adorned over time, and the musical settings made more elaborate also. But in its basic structure, our present Liturgy means and does the same things as it always did. If Justin the Philosopher could step from a time machine and attend our Divine Liturgy today, he might wonder about a number of things (pews, for one). But as the service progressed, I imagine he would feel very much at home.