

Worship in Lent

Anton C. Vrame, Ph.D.

During Great Lent, the worship patterns of the Church change dramatically. There are no weekday Divine Liturgies, except for the Feast of the Annunciation should it fall during the week. The Sunday Divine Liturgy switches from the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom to the Liturgy of St. Basil. The Pre-sanctified Divine Liturgy is celebrated. There is the Canon of St. Andrew, the Akathist Hymn. A few words about each:

The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil according to Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas, “was until the twelfth century, the chief liturgy of Constantinople...celebrated every Sunday and every Feast Day. Now it is used only ten times per year on the five Sundays of the Great Fast; on the vigils of Pascha, Christmas, and Epiphany; on Holy Thursday and on the Feast of St. Basil, January 1.” For the worshipper, the spoken and sung parts of the Liturgy are identical to that of Chrysostom’s Liturgy, with only two exceptions. The so-called “inaudible prayers” are different and tend to be longer (It is believed that Chrysostom’s goal was to shorten Basil’s Liturgy when he composed his text.). And the biggest difference is the anaphora, the prayer of the priest and faithful from the Creed through the offering and consecration of the Bread and Wine for Holy Communion. The prayers are longer than those of the anaphora of Chrysostom, and are rich in biblical references and theological imagery.

The Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts is not a full Divine Liturgy in that it does not contain the anaphora, or an offering and consecration of the Eucharist. The Liturgy is comprised of Vespers, the procession to the altar table of Holy Communion consecrated at the Divine Liturgy the previous Sunday or Saturday (hence “pre-sanctified”), and the distribution of Holy Communion. This solemn and wordless procession is distinct in that the celebrant as an act of reverence covers his head with the Aer.

The Akathist Hymn is a twenty-four stanza poem/hymn to honor the Virgin Mary and is associated with the Annunciation. In some ways, the service is not “lenten” at all but an extended hymn of praise. Akathistos means “not sitting,” so it is customary to stand during these portions. In Greek practice, the service is a Compline Service into which the hymn is inserted. This custom of singing one portion of the hymn on the first four Fridays of Lent and the entire hymn on the fifth Friday is a recent practice of the Greek Church. The Slavic Churches do not have this practice but sing the entire hymn in one service, usually around the Feast of the Annunciation. According to Kallistos Ware (1978), the link between the Akathistos Hymn and the Feast of the Annunciation is strong. Interesting in 2013 is that the Annunciation is celebrated early in Great Lent and we will “stretch out” our remembrance of the Annunciation for weeks after the Feast.

The Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. This canon is chanted within a Compline Service. The Canon is penitential in nature, a prolonged confession of sin, especially with its refrain, “Have mercy upon me, O God, have mercy on me (see K. Ware). It is traditional to celebrate the Canon during the first week of Lent, but it can happen other times.

As you attend these services, listen carefully and you will receive a wonderful education!

For more information, I recommend, *The Lenten Triodion* by Kallistos Ware and Mother Mary (1978). The introductory article, “The Meaning of the Great Fast” is a classic. And “An Introduction to the Divine Liturgy” by Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas (1985) in the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Pew Edition. You will find this article an excellent overview of the Liturgies of the Orthodox Church.

