

Article

Death and Dying in Orthodox Liturgy

Nicholas Denysenko

Department of Theological Studies, Loyola Marymount University, 1 Loyola Marymount University Dr, Los Angeles, CA 90045, USA; ndenysen@lmu.edu; Tel.: +1-310-568-6235

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Abstract: The Orthodox Church is known for its liturgical aesthetics. The rich liturgical cycle consists of several liturgical offices celebrated throughout the year, complete with icons, chant, polyphony, and powerful ritual gestures. The Divine Liturgy is the external symbol of the typical Orthodox liturgy. The liturgical celebration profoundly shapes the inner and outer lives of the liturgical participants, as liturgy is a constant and repetitive rehearsal of dying and rising to new life. This article examines the most salient patterns and instances of dying and rising to new life in Orthodox liturgy and concludes with a reflection on how engaging this process might have a greater impact on the daily lives of Orthodox Christians today.

Keywords: Baptism; death; rising; Communion; repentance

The Orthodox Church projects many images to the public. In Western society, Orthodoxy is known for its ethnic dimension, especially when parishes host festivals with native foods, music, and dancing and invite the public's participation. The public sneaks a glimpse into Orthodoxy at performances featuring world-renowned composers such as Rachmaninoff and Pärt and local art exhibits displaying galleries of icons. The music and iconography belong to Orthodoxy's liturgical tradition, which continues to retain select aspects of the structure and aesthetical performative style of its Byzantine and Russian imperial past. These public images of Orthodoxy do not communicate the fullness of its inner and outer liturgical life, however. Deeper and regular participation in the ordinary weekly worship of Orthodoxy, the Sunday Divine Liturgy, discloses the Orthodox Church as a community of faithful that participates in Christ's death in preparation for eternal life.

In this essay, I argue that Orthodox liturgy initiates the faithful into a process of death in Christ and dying to themselves, preparing them for eternal life. Baptism establishes this process of death and dying, and the pattern is repeated in the regular celebration of the Divine Liturgy, and complemented by participation in other liturgical offices. I begin by showing how Baptism makes death and dying normative for the Orthodox Christian. Then, I explore the Divine Liturgy to show how death and dying to sin are necessary to receive the gift of communion in the Holy Spirit, which is a foretaste of life shared with the Triune God. The analysis of the Divine Liturgy includes consultation of preparation for Holy Communion and the prayers recited after Communion, and I will draw from these to demonstrate how the pattern of death and dying appears throughout the Orthodox liturgical tradition. This analysis applies to both the inner and outer lives of Orthodox Christians, and this essay concludes with a reflection on the challenge of applying the discipline of liturgical death and dying to the challenges of relationships Orthodox Christians confront in daily life.

1. Orthodox Liturgy: Baptism as Death in Christ in Preparation for Eternal Life

The initial participation in Christ's death and dying to sin begins with Baptism in Orthodox liturgy. It might seem absurd to begin with the obvious, since the primary theological motif underpinning Baptism is the paschal mystery of death and resurrection. The primary reason for beginning with Baptism is the inauguration of the ritual pattern of death and dying and rising to new life. It is this

pattern of dying to sin with the anticipation of rising to new life that appears in all other Orthodox liturgical services and is repeated most profoundly in the Eucharist. Baptism is particularly helpful for connecting participation in Christ's death with the practices of dying to sin and rising to new life in ordinary Christian daily life.

Patterns of Death in Baptism

The rite of Baptism contains numerous allusions to death. The most prevalent references to death occur in the ritual texts and gestures that cast out powers opposed to God from all places of the ritual celebration. A series of exorcisms take place at the beginning of the rite, followed by the candidate's renunciation of Satan. These ritual components establish the beginning of putting to death the covenant with the evil one in order to rise to life in a new covenant with Christ. The next major apotropaic action occurs in the blessing of baptismal waters, when the celebrant makes the sign of the cross in the water with his hand (three times) and breathing upon the water, casting out God's enemies:

Let all adverse powers be crushed beneath the singing of your most precious Cross! (3x)
We pray You, o Lord, let every airy and invisible specter withdraw itself from us, and let not a demon of darkness conceal himself in this water; neither let an evil spirit, bringing obscurity of purpose and rebellious thoughts, descend into it with him (her) that is about to be baptized [1].

The purpose of cleansing the water in this fashion is to make the font a place where the covenant with Christ and the Holy Trinity can commence, without any of God's adversaries laying claim to the one receiving Baptism. After performing the apotropaic rites of casting out dark powers, the presider calls upon God to make the water a place where life begins anew:

But do you, o Master of All, declare this water to be the water of redemption, water of sanctification, a cleansing of flesh and spirit, a loosing of bonds, a forgiveness of sins, an illumination of soul, a laver of regeneration, a renewal of the spirit, a gift of sonship, a garment of incorruption, a fountain of life. For You have said, o Lord: 'wash, and be clean; put away evil from your souls' [1].

The fountain of water becomes a place of transformation ([2], p. 50). The rite denotes the transformation of the water itself, as it becomes God's instrument of redeeming, cleaning, renewing, and illuminating the one receiving Baptism. The most important motif to take from the symbiosis of ritual and text in the baptismal blessing of waters is the inseparability of death and new life. In Baptism, God recreates those receiving the mystery into new human beings who are God's children, but the process of recreating is impossible without death; the entire human participant needs to be made new, and this process can begin only when the candidate partakes of Christ's death and then puts sin to death. The text also refers to the water as a garment of incorruption. The new human being's recreation is preserved by the very water that has been a divine instrument of recreation, and, in practical terms, this is possible only through the community's memory of Baptism, celebrated annually at the blessing of Theophany waters on January 6 [3].

The blessing of the oil that follows the blessing of waters is the next preparatory rite, calling upon God to bless the oil through the descent of the Holy Spirit so that the oil would become:

An anointing of incorruption, a shield of righteousness, a renewal of soul and body, and averting of every operation of the devil, to the removal of all evils from them that are anointed with it in faith, or are partakers of it [1].

The presider pours the oil into the water in the sign of the cross three times while the assembly sings 'Alleluia', and then the presider takes some of the oil and anoints the one receiving Baptism with it on the forehead, breast, between the shoulders, and on the ears. The prebaptismal blessing and anointing with oil is preparatory for the Baptism to occur in the font, but, despite its secondary

ranking in the ritual performance, it bears the same function as the blessing of waters; to protect the one receiving Baptism from adversarial powers who might struggle with God for dominion over the newly-born Christian ([2], p. 52; [4], p. 107). As with the blessing of water, the oil contributes to the process of new birth, which again requires some action of death, in this case the ‘removal of all evils’ from the one being baptized.

The prayer recited by the presider over the oil is rooted in an anamnesis of the covenant God created with humanity through the great flood and the renewal of humanity in Noah’s ark:

Sovereign Lord and Master, God of our Fathers, Who did send to them in the Ark of Noah a dove bearing a twig of olive in its beak as a sign of reconciliation and salvation from the Flood, and through these things prefigured the Mystery of Grace [1].

In terms of liturgical celebration, the anamnesis establishes the epiclesis, wherein the Church petitions God to send the Spirit and bless the oil ([5], pp. 46–50). The anamnesis itself functions as the community’s reminder that God gave humanity the olive branch as a sign of the recreation of humanity. The olive branch is a token of the new peace between God and humanity following the death of sin in the waters of the flood. In the present, the Church manufactures the oil used to renew the covenant between God and humanity through the olive trees. The use of olive oil as a secondary material instrument of God’s recreation of humanity is significant here because it represents the repetition of the pattern established in the blessing of waters as death to sin and evil, leading to recreation and renewal in the new covenant. Therefore, the use of oil is itself a symbol of this process of death in Christ and rising in new life, following the pattern established by the blessing of waters. One should also note that the power borne by the sanctified water and oil is not temporary. I would argue that the power of these elements is permanent because they convey the power of the eternal God, since the ritual texts demand divine intervention and presence in the instruments through which God acts.

The death in Christ and the rising to new life of the one to be baptized moves from preparation to realization when the candidate is immersed into the source of water three times, in the name of the Trinity, with the assistance of the presider. The intonation of Psalm 31 repeats these motifs already established by the preparatory rituals, as the psalm rejoices in the blessings received by those ‘whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered’. The Baptism through immersion in the water results in the death of sin.

The anointing with Chrism occurs at this point in Baptism [6]. Readers should note that there is no separation of Chrismation from Baptism in the Orthodox rite, but the anointing with Chrism occurs as part of the normal sequence of ritual events following Baptism.¹ The rite of Baptism continues with the prayer of Chrismation, which repeats the same themes in conformity with the ritual and theological patterns we have established. The Church prays that anointing with Chrism will deliver the following blessings to the one receiving Baptism:

Bestow upon him (her) also the seal of your omnipotent and adorable Holy Spirit, and the Communion of the Holy Body and Most Precious Blood of Your Christ; keep him (her) in your sanctification; confirm him (her) in the Orthodox Faith; deliver him (her) from the evil one and all his devices; preserve his (her) soul, through your saving fear, in purity and righteousness, that in every work and word, being acceptable before You, he (she) may become a child and heir of your heavenly kingdom [1].

The anointing with Chrism follows, with the sign of the cross being made on the forehead, eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears, breast, hands, and feet, symbolizing a whole-body anointing but also

¹ A methodological note here: the rite of Baptism does not include the prayer for the consecration of the Chrism, which does not observe the same pattern established here, since the prebaptismal oil and water were blessed in the same service. In Orthodoxy, Chrism is prepared by the patriarch or primate of a local church on Holy Thursday, as needed. The head of the local Church distributes the consecrated Chrism to eparchial bishops, who then share it with parish priests for Baptisms.

ritually connecting the Christian's everyday life of thinking and animated human action with the Holy Spirit [1].² The anointing with Chrism seals in the gifts bestowed at Baptism; the Christian is expected to continue to die to the temptations of the evil one in continuity with the death to evil inaugurated at Baptism. The prayer of Chrismation also explicates the destiny of the recreated child of God; she is to become a child and heir of God's kingdom. The gifts bestowed upon the baptized at the anointing with Chrism thus continue what was already given at Baptism. What is new in Chrismation is the permanence of the gift; the whole-body anointing denotes God's capacitating action of sustaining the gifts already established at Baptism by adding a new layer to the recreated human being, who is now also a temple of the Holy Spirit ([6], pp. 21–22). Also noteworthy in the text for the prayer of Chrismation is the notion that Chrismation is not a final act of God, leaving the new Christian to their own will; the prayers position Chrismation as the next step of Baptism, preparing the Christian to receive Holy Communion at the Divine Liturgy ([6], p. 22). Anointing with Chrism grants the Christian the sustaining power of the Spirit to animate them to grow in Christ; God will also provide the nourishment of Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist, which will enable the Christian to continue to die to the temptations of the evil one in anticipation of the fulfillment of the new life that was inaugurated by Baptism and Chrismation, as we shall see when we explore death, dying, and new life in the Divine Liturgy below.

The remainder of the rite of Baptism continues to build on the foundation established by the blessing of baptismal waters and oil and the anointing with Chrism. Attentive scholars might inquire about the traditional significance attributed to the conferring of the white garment to the new Christian (immediately following Chrismation), not to mention the singing of the hymn 'As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ: Alleluia' (Galatians 3:27) and circumambulation of the table; the public recitation of the Epistle (Romans 6:3–11), which communicates the traditional paschal motif associated with Baptism of late antiquity; the Gospel; tonsure; and the churching of the new Christian. All of these significant ritual components continue the pattern of death in Christ, dying to sin, and rising to new life inaugurated by the preparatory rites of Baptism.

The final liturgical component contributing to the motif of death in Christ and dying to sin in the rite of Baptism is the prayer said by the presider prior to the blessing of the waters [1]. As the deacon intones the litany for Baptism, which emphasizes the blessing of the waters, the presider offers a prayer of apology, asking for God's forgiveness of sins, to make the presider worthy of leading the liturgical rite of Baptism. The prayer emphasizes God's purification of the presider with the powerful language of penitential mortification:

Neither turn away your face from me, but overlook my offenses in this hour, O You that overlook the sins of men that they repent. Wash away the defilement of my body and the stain of my soul. Sanctify me wholly by Your all-effectual, invisible might, and by your spiritual right hand, lest, by preaching liberty to others, and offering this in the perfect faith of your unspeakable love for humankind, I may be condemned as a servant of sin [1].

The apologetic prayers of the presiding clergy are secondary to the primary rites we have treated earlier, but they are significant when considering the entirety of the liturgical context. The apologetic prayers refer to the gravitas of divine activity and blessing and require the participating clergy to die to their own distractions and their own selves so that their liturgical service is one of cooperation with divine activity and not distraction from it. In other words, a special kind of death to self in the moment is required of the presider, a liturgical asceticism that ensures the clergy will not be obstacles to the Church's prayer that God 'form the image of...Christ' in the baptismal candidate.

² I have limited this discussion to the anointing with Chrism in order to show how the process of dying in Christ and rising to new life occurs primarily in the sacraments of initiation. Orthodox Christianity also observes the tradition of anointing the sick with oil, which is likewise relevant to the process of dying in Christ. See [7] for more details.

2. Eucharist: Remembrance of Death in Preparation for Eternal Life

The regular, weekly celebration of the Eucharist (Divine Liturgy) is the primary liturgical event for the typical Orthodox parish.³ Through the course of the Liturgy, participants engage the practices of death in Christ and dying to sin in preparation for new life. In this sense, the Eucharist is the regular engagement of the process of dying to sin and rising to new life that was initially established at Baptism and fortified at Chrismation. In this section, we will focus primarily on the remembrance of and participation in Christ's death as the primary way the Eucharist promotes death and dying to sin as a process, and we will also refer to complementary liturgical components echoing death and dying as preparation for new life in the pre- and post-Communion prayers appointed to each participant. The structure of the Liturgy begins with the preparatory rites (prothesis), followed by the liturgy of the Word, the offertory, the anaphora, Holy Communion, and post-Communion. While the anaphora is the most significant component expressing the remembrance of Christ's death, we will observe the order of the Liturgy and begin with the prothesis.

The prothesis is the rite of preparation, in which the priest (and deacon) prepares the material elements for the offering of the liturgy. Fundamentally, the prothesis is a simple and necessary rite of preparing and arranging the bread, wine, and water used for the liturgy. The bread is placed on a special plate (diskos) and the wine is poured into an ornate cup with some cold water. In the early medieval period of Byzantine liturgical history, the prothesis rite endured a transformation ([8], pp. 16–34; [9], pp. 197–228). The deacons used to collect the breads and wine donated by the faithful and select the ones to be used for the liturgy ([8], p. 17). In the early medieval period, after the deacons had arranged all of the material elements, the patriarch would come and say one concluding prayer of preparation ([10], pp. 49–50), but during the middle to later Byzantine period, the preparation evolved into a detailed rite, in which every action of preparation represented some aspect of the life of Christ, from his birth through to his resurrection, possibly in response to the triumph of Orthodoxy and the multiplication of icons decorating Church interiors ([11], pp. 58–59). Stelyios Muksuris's detailed theological analysis of the rite shows that the placement of the particles on the diskos eventually depicted the ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church, while retaining its communication of the life of Christ ([12], pp. 155–59). The Churches observing the Byzantine rite today prepare the elements in memory of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection from the dead.

The remembrance of Christ's death is particularly poignant in the very first steps taken to prepare the bread for the Eucharist, when the priest pierces the bread with a spear, cutting the four sides to lift out the lamb to be used for Communion from the larger portion of the bread ([13], pp. 15–16). The lamb is the largest square part of the bread marked by a seal with the words "IC XC NI KA" (Jesus Christ the victor). The priest's words coinciding with each piercing of the bread denote the performance of a ritual sacrifice, illustrated by Table 1:

Table 1. Rituals and Texts in Preparing the Lamb.

Ritual Action	Text Accompanying Ritual Action
Piercing and cutting on the right side of the bread	'As a sheep led to the slaughter'
Piercing and cutting on the left side of the bread	'or as a blameless lamb before its shearers is dumb, so He opens not his mouth'
Piercing and cutting on the top of the bread	'In his humiliation his judgment was taken away'
Piercing and cutting on the lower part of the bread	'For his life is taken up from the earth'
Piercing the bread on the bottom right, cutting, and lifting	'For his life is taken up from the earth'
Cutting the lamb crosswise, but taking care not to break the seal	'Sacrificed is the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, for the life of the world and its salvation'
Turns the bread over, and pierces under the right side, underneath the seal	'One of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness, and his witness is true.'

³ The Orthodox Church permits the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on most days of the year, with the exception of weekdays of the forty-day Lenten fast and Good Friday. For parish communities, the Sunday Divine Liturgy is the primary regular experience of the Eucharist.

At this point in the rite, the priest (or deacon) pours the blessed wine and water into the cup. The rite continues with the priest removing particles from other breads and placing them on the diskos in order, which extends the Eucharistic memorializing to include all the orders of the Church, and is concluded by the ritual covering of the gifts, a final prayer, and a dismissal ([13], pp. 17–25).

We owe a debt of thanks to the historians who have explained how this functional rite of preparing a plate of bread and a cup of wine mixed with water evolved into an elaborate remembrance of Christ's sacrificial death. There is no doubt that the rite is one of pictorial historicism, elongating the preparation of the bread into a series of particular incisions and cuts that refer to the Old Testament figures of Christ as the lamb of God and the New Testament witness of blood and water emerging from his side when the soldier pierced him with a spear. Orthodoxy has received a patristic mystagogical interpretation of this rite to understand that the incisions into the bread are not a real sacrifice of Christ occurring anew but the Church's response to Christ's command to remember his death.⁴ The preparatory rite collects the entire memory of this death into an anticipation of the offering of the sacrifice to come at the liturgy, as the repetition of remembrance of Christ's death increases its weight in the Liturgy and contributes to the liturgy's exhortation to the people to participate in it ([12], pp. 195–211).

A second remembrance of Christ's death occurs during the Great Entrance, when the gifts are brought from the appointed table in the sanctuary to be ceremonially placed on the altar ([8], pp. 242–50). As with the prothesis rite, the Great Entrance is essentially a functional rite of moving the plate and cup for the offering and Holy Communion to the altar table. The placement of the gifts on the altar table came to symbolize Christ's death and burial in many local Christian centers as early as the fourth century ([8], pp. 35–38). The entrance as a ritual memorial of Christ's burial remains a part of the contemporary Orthodox liturgy, evinced by the Troparia recited by the presider when the gifts are placed on the table:

(1) The noble Joseph, when he had taken down Thy most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in fine linen and anointed it with spices, and placed it in a new tomb; (2) In the tomb with the body and in hell with the soul as God; in paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, wast Thou, o boundless Christ, filling all things; (3) Bearing life and more fruitful than paradise, brighter than any royal chamber: Thy tomb, o Christ, is the fountain of our resurrection ([13], p. 127).

Robert Taft's scholarship shows that the placement of the gifts on the table had come to symbolize the liturgy as an iconic depiction of Christ's death and resurrection, with the altar functioning as the tomb. ([8], pp. 245–46). In this case, the hymns recited during the placement of the gifts refer to the burial of Christ's body while anticipating his resurrection from the dead to be shared with the faithful.

Another element symbolizes the process of dying to sin on the part of the people at this point in the liturgy; namely, the Cherubikon, the well-known hymn chanted as the clergy perform the rituals of preparation to perform the entrance and deposition of the gifts:

Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now lay aside all earthly cares. That we may receive the king of all who comes invisibly upborne by the angelic hosts. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia ([13], p. 122).

This well-known hymn is sung as often as needed to accompany the procession of gifts from the sanctuary back to the altar. The hymn's brief reference to 'laying aside all earthy cares' is a final call to attentiveness and effort on the part of the faithful, whose full attention is required as the Church prepares to present its offering to God. The hymn is similar to the prayer of apology recited by the presider at Baptism, as it calls the whole assembly, clergy and laity, to die to selfish concerns in

⁴ The pattern of interpreting the ritual actions as historical remembrances of events in Jesus' life occurred in mystagogical treatises on the Divine Liturgy in theologians such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, Germanos of Constantinople, and Symeon of Thessalonike, among others.

preparation for participation in Christ's death memorialized and ritualized.⁵ The Great Entrance of the Orthodox liturgy thus functions as a remembrance of death in the interpretation of ceremonially placing the gifts on the altar as a representation of taking Jesus down from the cross and burying him in the tomb. The assembly is called to actively witness the memory of Christ's death, which leads to the ritual act of dying to one's self in order to devote full attention to the primary action of offering in the anaphora.

3. The Anaphora as Remembrance of Death and Resurrection

The anaphora communicates the process of death in Christ and dying to sin more poignantly than any other part of the liturgy. The anaphora emphasizes the transformation of the liturgical participant and the destiny of the communicant, which makes death and dying an essential part of the process but not its goal. The anaphora of St. John Chrysostom is used most frequently in the Orthodox liturgy; its text is brief, and it does not contain many references to the cross. The so-called 'post-Sanctus' portion of the prayer leads into the Institution Narrative and refers to the last supper that occurred 'in the night in which he was given up, or rather gave himself up for the life of the world'. Immediately prior to the elevation of the gifts (by the deacon, or in his absence, the priest or bishop), the presider recites the so-called anamnesis:

Remembering this saving commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven and the second and glorious coming ([13], p. 67).

The anamnesis invokes the memory of the entirety of the paschal mystery; it is not only death, but an offering presented in thanksgiving for all of God's action 'for us'. This brief section of the anaphora depicts the actual process in which the participants are engaging; death, burial, and resurrection, all with the hope of ascension to share life with God. Following the ritual actions of consecration, the anaphora continues by iterating the blessing God gives to the participants: purification of soul, remission of sins, communion of the Holy Spirit, and fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven ([13], p. 69). Participation in the Eucharist results in the remission of sins and communion of the Holy Spirit (eternal life lived with God). In other words, the Eucharist repeats the same process of dying and rising to new life in and with God established at Baptism, as these gifts, which are essentially baptismal, are given again and again at the celebration of the Eucharist.

The emphasis on the necessity of living the process of dying and rising to new life is evinced by the next and last part of the anaphora. The prayer connects the Eucharistic offering to 'those who have fallen asleep in the faith', with every imaginable type of person remembered at this point in the liturgy ([13], p. 69). The action of remembrance refers to those who have already been through the process of dying and rising again, as those who are 'asleep' are now alive in Christ, acknowledged through the assembly's act of making memory ([14], pp. 34–37). The Orthodox liturgy's emphasis on the gift of eternal life is communicated by the ritual actions of fracture, commixture, and zeon. The fraction is again functional, the breaking of the Lord's body into the number of pieces required for distribution to all communicants at that particular liturgy. After the fraction, the presider places the lamb into the cup and says 'the fullness of the Holy Spirit'. Another reference to the descent of the Spirit on the cup occurs when the deacon pours the zeon (hot water) into the cup, making the contents of the cup a warm mixture of consecrated water, wine, and bread ([13], p. 79).

In his magisterial study of the Divine Liturgy, Robert Taft summarizes the theological significance of the Byzantine precommunion rites:

⁵ The Cherubikon is sung while the presider recites the prayer of apology, 'No one is worthy', preparing those who officiate at the altar to engage their own process of dying to self in preparation for offering the Eucharist.

Whereas the consecrated bread and wine is a twofold sign of Christ's sacrificial body and blood, the commingling, symbolizing the union of these two species, images the glorified humanity of the Risen Christ and our participation, via communion, in his risen life...the desire to keep the chalice warm right up until communion to signify that we receive the Body and Blood of the living, Risen Christ, eventually led to delaying the infusion of hot water until before the Great Entrance and ultimately until just before communion ([15], pp. 516–17).

The structure, text, and ritual performance of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy call upon the participants to remember Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection and participate in it. The act of remembering leads to participation in anticipation of the ultimate gift offered by God; eternal life to be lived with God, which can occur after death. The particular remembrance of those who have 'fallen asleep' is in itself an engagement of our process for the participating faithful, as their memory of the dead conveys an acceptance of the inevitability of dying in this life, with the hope of receiving the same gift granted to the saints; eternal life in Christ, in the communion of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, the Orthodox liturgy emphasizes the whole point of the paschal mystery and the resurrection; eternal life with God. Death is not the goal of liturgy; it is a requirement for eternal life, which is why it is repeatedly rehearsed.

4. Intense Rehearsal of Dying: Pre- and Post-Communion Prayers

If the assembly engages the process of dying to sin during the course of the actual Divine Liturgy, this activity is much more intense in the rites the faithful are expected to perform in preparation for the liturgy and in thanksgiving after its conclusion. The prayers said in preparation for Communion are generally available to the laity across the Orthodox world; liturgical books for lay use tend to include the preparatory prayers along with the prayers of thanksgiving. The laity's actual use of the preparatory prayers varies. Those who desire intense and rigorous preparation for Communion will prepare by saying the entire office of preparation for Holy Communion, beginning with the Canon and including all of the prayers. Some kind of fast will accompany the preparation. At minimum, one is to fast from all food and drink from midnight before the liturgy, though some fast for a few days prior to the liturgy and also receive the mystery of penance. This particular fasting practice coheres with the recent instruction of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church from June 2016, which met in Crete and decreed that 'fasting from foods at midnight' is required for 'frequent participation in Holy Communion' [16]. While the laity has some flexibility in the details of the process for preparation, it is customary to include recitation of the pre-Communion prayers [16].

The prayers in preparation for Holy Communion are a crucial part of the process of dying to sin because of the communicants' consistent and fervent prayers that God would remove inclinations to sin and sin itself. The preparatory prayers ask God to grant that participation in Communion would eradicate passions and deliverance from enemies and afflictions ([17], pp. 29–44). For example, in the Third Ode, the first Troparion asks God to purify the communicant with these words:

Grant me, O Christ, the tears to cleanse the defilement of my heart, so that in good conscience, faith, and fear, I may approach the communion of your divine gifts ([17], p. 29).

The second Troparion on the Third Ode requests that communion might result in eternal life and communion of the Holy Spirit, along with 'estrangement from passion and affliction' ([17], p. 29). There are several references to communion removing passion, exemplified by the second Troparion on the Sixth Ode:

O Christ, grant that I may be rid of my passions and grow in your grace, May I be strengthened and confirmed in life by the communion of Your holy mysteries ([17], p. 32).

The point of Communion is the eradication of sin; the third Troparion on the ninth ode uses the imagery of Communion as fire:

O my savior, may your body and precious blood be for me like fire and light, consuming the substance of sins, burning the weeds of my passions, and wholly enlightening me to worship Your divinity ([17], p. 34).

The disposition of the communicant in preparation for Communion is one of fear and trembling, words that occur repetitively throughout the canon. One is to be fearful lest receiving the gift of Communion would result in the worst kind of death: 'I tremble as I take this fire lest I be consumed as wax and grass' ([17], p. 33). The notion of fear and trembling before the indescribable gift of God in Communion illuminates the preparation for Communion as a type of death, as dying to passions and withstanding the assaults of enemies is absolutely necessary before receiving Communion. In other words, the hard work of dying to sinful acts prevents a much worse death, the one of condemnation that results in permanent alienation and separation from God. The inevitable fear of condemnation results in the image of a paradox; God's love granted through Communion is utterly incomparable with the defilement of human sin. The strong language of defilement, despair, and the embellishment of personal failure and unworthiness is extremely heavy, which led the editors of the translation used here to attempt to clarify what is actually meant by the language:

Parts of these prayers are very direct and uncompromising in their description of human sinfulness. The purpose of such expressions is not to debase us, but rather to confront aspects of our life, which we frequently try to avoid. If we are to be healed and seek the Father's perfection, we must be honest with ourselves ([17], p. 29).

The necessity for an editorial preface explaining the language of the prayers yields two observations. Embracing self-honesty and confronting passions with the hope of personal transformation results in a regular process of practicing death. In this sense, the canon in preparation for Communion coheres strongly with our hypothesis on Orthodox liturgy as an engagement of the process of death in Christ, dying to sin, and rising to new life. The editorial preface also illuminates the possibility that one might misinterpret the intent of the prayers. The weight placed on blaming one's self can be confused for self-deprecation, so pastoral guidance on the true meaning of an honest confession of sin is advisable for communicants to experience the loving embrace of God's reception of penitent sinners. The pre-Communion prayers encourage communicants to engage in a process of dying to passions and the temptations of enemies with God's assistance.

The prayers appointed for preparation for Communion elaborate the themes established by the canon. The communicant is a sinner, unworthy, disobedient, and completely wretched, all images of the self presented in the first prayer of preparation attributed to Saint Basil the Great ([17], p. 37). The prayers juxtapose the fallen character of the communicant with the love and condescension of God. St. Basil's prayer, the first one of this order, remembers the paschal mystery as the event manifesting God's love for humankind:

Because of your abundant goodness, in these latter days You became flesh and were crucified and buried for us thankless and erring people, and by your own blood you renewed our nature corrupted by sin ([17], p. 37).

The prayer mentioned that the communicant is 'emboldened' by God's compassion and thus draws near to receive Communion, asking God to grant 'that to my last breath I might partake of your holy gifts uncondemned, looking to the communion of Your Holy Spirit for eternal life', as well as a favorable judgment at God's 'tribunal' ([17], p. 38). The third prayer attributed to Saint Symeon Metaphrastes also recalls the paschal mystery and also applies the specific components of Pascha with a type of death in the communicant:⁶

⁶ Note that the second prayer attributed to St. John Chrysostom also asks Christ to mortify the passions.

You underwent the life-giving and saving passion: the cross, the nails, the spear, and death itself. Mortify in me the bodily passions that destroy the soul. By your burial you took captive the kingdom of Hades; bury and destroy the devices of evil spirits by purifying my thoughts ([17], p. 39).

The prayers of preparation for Holy Communion require the communicant to adopt an identity of repentance, to be mindful of the depravity of the soul, and to name one's self as a wretch, approaching communion with a petition that Christ would kill the passions and wipe away every aspect of defilement to prepare the communicant for renewing the identity as a partaker of the Holy Spirit. Preparation for Communion involves an expedited process of repentance and transformation, complete with the sacramental theology of Baptism all in one private office recited before the Divine Liturgy.

Communicants are also expected to recite the prayers of thanksgiving after Communion. In some parishes, these prayers are chanted aloud, with the faithful remaining in the Church until their conclusion. The short office begins with a threefold 'Glory to You, o God', followed by approximately six prayers of varying lengths. The first prayer is the longest of these, and all of the prayers thank God for making the sinful communicant worthy of Communion. The primary feature of the prayers after Communion is the petition that God's gift continue the process of repentance. The first prayer after Communion echoes all of the paschal themes we have examined here, applying them to the life of the communicant by interpreting the reception of Communion as a reception of Christ, whose grace assists the communicant in persevering through the process of dying and rising to new life:

O Master, lover of mankind, you died and rose for our sake and favored us with these, your awesome and life-giving Mysteries for the benefit and sanctification of our souls and bodies. Grant that they may be for the healing of my soul and body and for the rout of every adversary, for the enlightenment of the eyes of my heart, for the peace of my spiritual powers, for an undaunted faith, for an unfeigned love, for the fullness of wisdom, for the keeping of Your commandments, for growth in Your divine grace, and for belonging to Your kingdom, in order that, preserved by them in Your holiness, I may always remember Your grace and no longer live for myself, but for You, our Master and Benefactor...Thus, when I depart from this life in the hope of life eternal, may I attain that everlasting rest where the sound of those celebrating never ceases, and where there is no end to the delight of those who behold the ineffable beauty of Your face ([17], pp. 324–25).

This short excerpt from the first prayer after Communion demonstrates that the paschal mystery imparts the activity of the risen Christ, whose grace capacitates the communicant to die to the temptations and sin confronted in this life, with the promise of eternal life granted to those who stay the course. The prayer emphasizes the relationship between receiving God's divine grace, imparted through Communion, and dying to one's self for the purpose of living for God. This phrase shows that participation in the Eucharistic Liturgy continues the process of death in Christ and dying to sin inaugurated at Baptism and expresses the point of the outer life of a Christian; the glorification of God, not one's self. The text of this prayer also presents an important feature of the liturgical process of death and dying; rehearsing death to sin is preparation for the death that ends this life and inaugurates life in God. If one learns how to die and rise to new life in this life, the death of the next life will naturally result in rising to life as one who belongs to God's kingdom ([17], p. 324).

This portion of the paper has developed a thesis arguing that liturgical participation is learning how to die to sin and rise to new life. This process begins with Baptism and is engaged regularly in the Eucharist. Learning how to die depends on the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection and the confidence granted by the saints whose memory testifies to the joyful life in Christ that follows death. The process also appears to require the participants to adopt a lowly stature, which presumably inspires them to desire the gift of Christ and to honestly confront their sins. Brutal self-honesty prepares one to truly want to end the cycle of sin that permeates this life. In principle, this presentation on the

inner life of Orthodox liturgy also depicts its outer life, as the liturgical participants are capacitated for authentic transformation into sinless people who are like Christ.

The contemporary Orthodox liturgy continues the tradition of rigorous self-examination established and cultivated during the Byzantine era. Derek Krueger published a study of several liturgical examples from the Byzantine liturgical repository in which the liturgical participants apply the archetypal penitents of the Bible to themselves [18]. Krueger's analysis examines models of shaping the liturgical self from Romanos the Melodist, Eucharistic prayers, the penitential Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, the Lenten Triodion, and the texts of St. Symeon the New Theologian [18]. Krueger summarizes the liturgical experience of the participants as one of participating with the fathers and mothers of the Biblical past:

The rites and offices of the church offered the forum where Byzantine Christians learned to apply a penitential bible to themselves...Within the space of Byzantine Churches, Orthodox Christians learned the history of their own redemption. But they were more than spectators. Through the hymns of the Church, Byzantine worshippers joined a large cast of biblical characters. They lamented with Adam; repented with David; approached Christ in supplication with the Harlot, the Leper, the Samaritan, and the Hemorrhaging woman; awaited Christ's saving hand like Peter...By historicizing Byzantine concepts of guilt, our inquiry has articulated the cultural construction of self-blame and penance as a method for resolving the potential effects and apparent consequences of sin ([18], p. 218).

Krueger's thorough examination of the formation of penitents through the Byzantine liturgy within the particular Byzantine cultural framework explains why there is so much weight on self-examination in the process of dying to sin. The contemporary services continue this tradition but in new cultural contexts. The point of the process is to be honest about sin; admitting sin is the first step towards awareness of sin and of the need to modify one's patterns of thinking and acting that result in sin. The regular practice of dying in Christ is a way of putting sin to death and rising to new life in Christ. In the Orthodox Church, pastors charged with the responsibility of spiritual direction should emphasize the good resulting from dying to the patterns and actions leading to sin to ensure that faithful do not misunderstand the language of these texts and prayers and come to believe that they are inherently bad or evil.

5. From Liturgy to Daily Life: Do People Rise to New Life?

In the concluding portion of this paper, I will reflect on the challenges of applying the liturgical principle of death in Christ and dying to sin to the ordinary daily life of Orthodox people. The presentation of death and dying in the liturgy is based on a careful examination of the contents of the liturgical offices. The first challenge occurs when we apply reality to the ideal of liturgical engagement. In teaching the meaning of Baptism and Chrismation, a pastor has published material to share with the people, but there is no guarantee that they will read it nor remember particular themes from the rite of Baptism. The prothesis rite is celebrated privately and quietly, and, even if it was offered publicly, it occurs so early, often long before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, that most people would not participate. The memorial of Christ's death and resurrection is powerful in the anaphora, but most parishes do not read the text aloud for the people to hear, and, even in some places where the prayers are read, it is not comprehensible to the people. The above presentation depicts the fullness of what the liturgy can offer in terms of a rehearsal of dying and death for the purpose of rising to new life; this is why I deliberately use the word 'capacity' throughout, because even the most sensitive and caring pastor can only do so much to grant the people access to the riches of the liturgical celebration.

In terms of engagement, one could persuasively argue that a small percentage of very devoted parishioners is committed to engaging the fullness of the liturgy. These are people who regularly submit lists of the names of beloved dead and living for commemoration at the liturgy, who attend

regularly and receive liturgical catechesis with enthusiasm and interest. These are people whose liturgy books are worn and who know how to find the prayers in preparation for Holy Communion. They are also to be found among those who linger after Church for the prayers of thanksgiving after Communion. Only a small cohort of the devoted faithful would be able to follow the paschal passages from the liturgy, commit them to memory, and attempt to apply them to the transformation of their own souls and hearts.

A larger group of people has some sense of what is happening in the liturgy. This larger group attends with some frequency and is attuned to the primary features of Sunday worship. They cannot identify the prothesis or anaphora, and they are more likely to read the bulletin than a pew prayer book with Communion prayers, but they will reflect upon Christ's sacrifice on the cross, they will faithfully request prayers for their beloved dead and living, and they will come forward for Communion when the deacon commands them to 'draw near'.

Pastors have complained about the tepid attitude of people to liturgy since the beginning of Christianity. It is an eternal phenomenon affecting all Christian churches, and the persistence of this reality has resulted in a consistent gap between the capacity of liturgy to transform people and the reality of the people's commitment to liturgical engagement. If Orthodox Church leaders would be honest about their ability to change this paradigm, they might be content with a slight increase in the numbers of people who are wholly devoted to the Church and those who attend with some frequency. Expecting the masses of people whose names are officially inscribed in Orthodox parish membership books to become regular and devoted participants is delusional.

In addition to the realities of people's commitment to liturgical participation, one must also consider the degree, or lack thereof, in the people's ability to consciously recognize that the liturgy is teaching them to engage the process of death in Christ and dying to sin in preparation for the next life. The Orthodox liturgy is organized in such a way that the most minute component related to the Divine Liturgy is essentially a microcosm of the liturgy itself. For example, saying the prayers of preparation for Communion is engaging the process of dying to sin in preparation for new life. The same process occurs in the Divine Liturgy, and one reflects upon it afterwards with the prayers of thanksgiving. The Liturgy itself repeats the opportunity to engage this process throughout its structures. The need to inscribe the process of death and dying upon each layer of liturgical structure and component demonstrates just how easy it is to avoid the process, to gloss over it, and to ignore it. In some way, each liturgical office presents a memorial of the paschal mystery and invites participation, with rising to new life and permitting God to recreate the participants always being the primary goal. The appearance of this process of dying and rising to new life on the periphery of liturgy, in places such as the private prayers of the faithful Orthodox Christian, attests to its potential significance in contributing to the outer life of the Christian.

There are natural points of intersection between the primary features of liturgy that promote death in Christ and dying to sin amongst faithful Orthodox Christians who participate in the Church's liturgical life with varying degrees of frequency. These points of intersection are memorials for the dead and the solemnities of the liturgical year, especially Lent and Pascha. Holy Week offers an opportunity for both devoted Orthodox Christians and the masses of people to attend the offices of Good Friday. Even minimal participation opens the door for the pastor to connect the liturgical process of death in Christ and rising to new life with the ordinary daily life of the people. Like the Divine Liturgy, Good Friday is a memorial of the paschal mystery, only much more intense because it is appointed to a particular day on the calendar. It is on these occasions that the critical masses of people who participate in liturgy for any number of reasons might consider the invitation to practice dying and rising with Christ. For those attending the solemnities with extended family or at the invitation of a more devoted participant, the people of the Church themselves become the models of dying and rising with Christ. For example, a grandmother who has been faithful to her family for generations despite tribulations and more attractive alternatives is modelling the process of death in Christ and dying to sin for her extended family. The same is true for the sick person who is enduring tribulation

and carrying a burdensome cross, not to mention the caretaker who gives freely of herself to serve one who is unable to function on their own.

In summary, the Orthodox liturgical legacy of dying in Christ and rising to new life is alive and well for all faithful people, since God transforms those who have the courage to ‘draw near’ to God. The people who respond affirmatively to the invitation to participate become the teachers who model the value of dying to sin to rise to new life.

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