GENERAL

divine liturgy of saint john chrysostom

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Introduction

For millions of Christians around the world, the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is more than a liturgical service—it is a living, breathing tradition that connects the faithful to the early Church, to the apostolic succession, and to the divine mysteries celebrated at the foot of the cross. Rooted in the theological genius of one of the greatest preachers of the fourth century, this liturgy has become the standard for the celebration of the Eucharist in the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and many other Eastern Christian communities. Whether you are a seasoned worshipper, a curious seeker, or a scholar of liturgical history, this article will guide you through the rich tapestry of prayers, hymns, and rituals that make the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom a cornerstone of Orthodox spirituality.

We will explore its historical development, dissect its structure, highlight its key hymns, and examine how it shapes the worship experience. By the end, you will have a comprehensive understanding of why this liturgy has endured for nearly two thousand years and how it continues to inspire awe and devotion in contemporary congregations.

Historical Origins of the Divine Liturgy

John Chrysostom: The Great Preacher

John Chrysostom, born in Antioch around 349 AD, earned his nickname—meaning “golden speech”—through his eloquence and moral clarity. After serving as Bishop of Constantinople from 398 to 407, he became renowned for his homilies that bridged the gap between scripture and daily life. His sermons were not merely theological treatises; they were practical guides for living a holy life in a rapidly changing world.

Chrysostom’s influence extended beyond preaching. He was a prolific writer on liturgical matters, offering detailed instructions on how to conduct the Eucharistic service. His theological insights, coupled with his administrative reforms, laid the groundwork for a standardized liturgical practice that would become the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom.

Development of the Liturgy in Constantinople

The early Christian Church in Constantinople experimented with various forms of the Eucharistic celebration. By the late fourth century, a liturgical model began to crystallize, heavily influenced by the Cappadocian Fathers and the liturgical traditions of the West. John Chrysostom’s revisions sought to streamline the service, reduce redundancy, and emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist.

His version incorporated elements from the Roman rite, such as the use of the Anaphora of St. Basil and the inclusion of the Great Litany. Over time, this amalgamation evolved into a distinct rite that reflected the theological priorities of the Eastern Church—particularly the emphasis on the mystery of the Eucharist and the communal nature of worship.

The Codification of the Liturgy

During the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527–565), the liturgical texts were officially codified. The codification process involved standardizing the prayers, hymns, and ceremonial actions, ensuring uniformity across the vast

Byzantine Empire. The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom was thus preserved in a form that remains largely unchanged to this day.

Later, the Council of Florence (1439) and the Council of Constantinople (1729) reaffirmed the use of this liturgy, solidifying its place as the primary Eucharistic celebration in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Structure of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

Opening Prayers and the Prokeimenon

The service opens with the **Prokeimenon**, a short psalm or hymn that sets the tone for the liturgy. Following this, the faithful participate in the Great Entrance, a procession that symbolizes the journey of the soul toward divine communion. The Great Entrance is accompanied by the chanting of the **Great Litany**—a series of petitions that invite the saints and angels to intercede on behalf of the congregation.

The Liturgy of the Catechumens

In the early Church, the Liturgy of the Catechumens—comprising readings from Scripture, the Gospel, and the homily—was conducted before the Eucharistic portion. In the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, this segment is streamlined but retains its essential elements. The reading of the Epistle and Gospel, followed by the Homily, serves to prepare the faithful intellectually and spiritually for the sacramental mystery that follows.

The Liturgy of the Faithful

After the Catechumens, the Liturgy of the Faithful begins. It includes the **Prothesis** (the preparation of the bread and wine), the **Orant** (the prayer of the faithful), the **Anaphora** (the Eucharistic prayer), and the **Communion**(the distribution of the Eucharist). Each of these components is rich with theological significance and liturgical beauty.

Comprehensive Breakdown of the Main Components

1. Opening Prayers – The Great Entrance and Great Litany set a reverent atmosphere.
2. Prothesis – The bread and wine are prepared on the altar.
3. Orant – The congregation offers a prayer of thanksgiving.
4. Anaphora – The central Eucharistic prayer, where the bread and wine are consecrated.
5. Communion – The faithful receive the Body and Blood of Christ.
6. Concluding Prayers – Blessings, hymns, and dismissal close the service.

Each section is punctuated by hymns, psalms, and the chanting of the **Canon**—a set of hymns that honor the Theotokos (Mother of God) and the saints. The Canon, typically sung after the Holy Communion, is one of the most beautiful and theologically profound parts of the liturgy.

Key Hymns and Psalms

- Great Litany – A series of petitions that invoke the intercession of saints and angels.
- Prokeimenon – A psalm that introduces the service.
- Canon of the Theotokos – A hymn of praise to the Virgin Mary, celebrating her role in salvation history.
- Hymn of the Three Lights – A short chant that follows the Holy Communion, symbolizing the Holy Trinity.
- Hymn of the Holy Trinity – A concluding hymn that reflects on the nature of God.

These hymns are not only musically enriching but also serve to deepen the theological understanding of the faithful. Each hymn is carefully chosen to reflect the themes of the liturgy—such as redemption, the incarnation, and the communion of saints.

Liturgical Texts and Their Theological Significance

Great Litany

The Great Litany is a powerful prayer that calls upon the saints, angels, and the entire Church to intercede for the living and the dead. Its repeated petitions—“Lord, have mercy,” “Grant us, O Lord, the grace of your mercy”—reaffirm the belief in the communion of saints and the efficacy of intercession. The litany is also a reminder of the Church’s unity across time and space.

The Anaphora

The Anaphora is the heart of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. In this prayer, the priest invokes the Holy Trinity, thanks the Lord for the gifts of bread and wine, and consecrates them into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Anaphora is rich in Christological and Trinitarian theology, drawing from the Apostles'' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Key phrases such as “It is truly, truly, that we believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things” and “It is truly, truly, that we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, born of the Father before all ages” highlight the central doctrines of faith. The Anaphora concludes with the Great Doxology, praising the Holy Trinity in the words: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.”

Variations and Regional Adaptations

Greek Orthodox Tradition

In the Greek Orthodox Church, the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is celebrated with a high level of reverence and ritual precision. The use of the **Orthodox chant** (also known as *kyrio*) is integral, with the choir singing the Canon in a style that emphasizes the melodic beauty of the text. The Greek tradition places particular emphasis on the use of icons during the liturgy, especially the icon of the Theotokos during the Canon.

Russian Orthodox Tradition

Russian Orthodox worshipers celebrate the Divine Liturgy with a distinctive liturgical style that incorporates the use of the **Orthodox chant** and the Russian language. The Russian liturgy is known for its solemnity and the use of **iconostasis**—a screen of icons that separates the sanctuary from the nave. The Russian tradition also features the **Great Canon** sung in a unique melodic arrangement that reflects the Russian spiritual heritage.

Catholic and Anglican Usage

While the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is primarily associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church, it has also been adopted by some Catholic and Anglican communities seeking to incorporate Eastern liturgical elements into their worship. In these contexts, the liturgy is often celebrated in a bilingual format, combining the traditional Greek text with local translations. The incorporation of Eastern liturgical practices has enriched the worship experience, fostering a deeper appreciation for the diversity within Christian liturgy.

How the Divine Liturgy Shapes Worship Experience

The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is not merely

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