

2026-08-05: History of the Liturgy (2026 Summer MS Boys Convention)

“Keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.”
(1 Corinthians 11:2)

Introduction

We live in the most advanced society that has ever existed. Technology, Medicine, Communication, Information, etc. has NEVER been at a higher level.

And if you go to any Protestant Church, you will

What is Liturgy?

Liturgy is Holy

It used to take 45 days to get from Florida to Washington state. Then cars were invented and it could take only 45 hours. Then planes were invented and it takes 4.5 hours! But God forbid the plane is an hour late... and if it's 3 hours late, I'm demanding a refund! This is the world we live in... we got so used to having everything fast and easy.

If I want food from a specific restaurant, I can push a button on my phone and it's here. If I want access to any information in the whole world, I can push a button on my phone with AI and I have it. We have Reels and Shorts and Doomscrolling. This is the fast-paced world that we live in.

Liturgy transcends all of that. Liturgy does something different. Liturgy is slow-paced. Liturgy brings us back to reality... because reality is not fast-paced. If I want to grow in virtue like being thankful, I cannot push a button on my phone and now I'm a thankful person. If I want to overcome a sin like lustful thoughts... I cannot push a button on my phone and overcome. I can't just read a book and it's done. These things take time. Liturgy brings us back to the pace of reality.

And this is what it means that Liturgy is **Holy**. Holy means **Set Apart from the World**. Set Apart for God.

When we enter the Liturgy, we enter into God's time.

For example, when Abouna prays: "Therefore, as we also **commemorate** His holy Passion, His Resurrection from the dead, His ascension into the heavens, and His sitting at Your right hand O

Father" - we are commemorating events that happened in the past. We are remembering them and keeping them as a memorial... but then Abouna continues "and His Second Coming which shall be from the heavens awesome and full of glory." - this is an event that hasn't happened yet! So how can we commemorate it?

It is because in that moment, we are not in the world's time. If you check your watch or look at a clock or look at your phone, yes you will see that time is progressing. But in the Liturgical Ritual we are seeing past, present and future converge to one point.

God, is timeless and eternal, He is not bound by time as we are, He is the creator of time itself, and He is inviting us to be present with Him. If I understand my role in the liturgy, then I will find myself in His presence, and His presence is outside of time.

Liturgy is Given by God

Liturgy is how God wants to be worshipped.

The concepts of liturgy, sacrifice and ritual were not invented by man, but have been the expression of worship that is acceptable to God since the beginning.

- Cain and Abel
 - God distinguishes between what is acceptable worship, and what is unacceptable worship.
- Noah
 - God distinguishes between clean and unclean animals, take 7 each of clean animals and 2 each of unclean animals, and the purpose was because only clean animals were to be used for worship and sacrifice.
- Exodus
 - God laid out how the tabernacle should be constructed - what materials, how much of each material, how they were arranged, who would build it, etc.
- Leviticus
 - God ordained specific instructions for each of the burnt offerings, gave them feasts, detailed the rituals for the day of atonement, gave them a daily raising of incense morning and evening, the showbread and the lighting of the candles, the vestments of the priests.
- Anointing
 - God told Moses how to anoint Aaron for the priesthood, and Samuel how to anoint Saul and David for the kingship.
- Christ
 - God incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ, instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the New Covenant and the Liturgy with the twelve disciples and told them "do this in remembrance of Me."
 - It was the Lord Jesus who then taught the apostles HOW to do it during the 40 days after the Resurrection.
 - In turn, those disciples and their disciples would be the ones who authored the Liturgies that we still use today.

What we have in our hands with Liturgy is something that is given to us by God. It is not for us to change to adapt to our desires.

Liturgy is the Work of the People...

In the Old Testament, everything related to the work of the priest, the sacrifices, the tabernacle or the temple, etc. is called in Greek "λειτουργία" which is the word "Liturgy."

This word means "work of the people."

- λαός means "people"
- ἔργο means "work" (e.g. ergonomics).

Some people treat the Liturgy as a show that they watch... they come to the Liturgy, stand in their place and become silent observers. If we treat the Liturgy like a show, not only will we miss out on the actual experience, but we're more likely to just get completely distracted. The Liturgy is not a very entertaining show to watch! So if it starts to get boring, I start to divert my attention elsewhere and get distracted with my social media, or a game on my phone, or reading the news, or trying to "multi-task" during the Liturgy.

But we are not meant to be watchers or observers of liturgy, but rather active participants. When you go to a show, the entertainer is facing you and he's trying to make you laugh or invoke an emotional response - but when you come to the liturgy, the priest is not facing you, but he's facing east WITH you, because he, LIKE you, is a participant. He, like you, needs repentance. He, like you, needs to eat of the Eucharist. He, like you, needs salvation. So I, like him, need to participate in the Liturgy.

This is why the word "Liturgy" is used - because it means "work of the people." And actually we can expand the definition to be "work of the people FOR the people"

What is History?

1. Finding Sources

- The Holy Scripture
- Patristic Writings
- Church Canons
- Architecture & Iconography
- Liturgical Manuscripts

2. Analyzing Sources

- Is this source reliable?
- How old is this source?
 - Do you think an older source is better or a newer source?
 - Both are valuable! They tell us about different time periods and can show us how things developed or changed over time!
- Does this source show me something that is in line with what I already know from the history?

3. Extrapolating Facts

- What facts does this source give me?

4. Making Conclusions

- Based on what I already know, and what I have already gathered, and the facts this source has given me, what do I think happened? What is the history?
- Review

Early Liturgy

The Last Supper

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.
(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

- This is what the Lord did on the Last Supper.
 - And St Paul received this.
 - And St Paul delivered it to the Corinthians.
 - And we still do it today!
- We take bread, give thanks, break it, say "Take eat, this is My body"
- We take the cup, give thanks, and drink it saying "Take drink, this is My blood"
- Then we proclaim the Lord's death! (Amen Amen Amen, Your death, O Lord, we proclaim)

Liturgy in the Apostles

“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.” (Acts 20:7)

- First Day of the Week (Sunday)
- Disciples came together (Assembly)
- Break Bread (Celebrate the Eucharist)
- Paul (Officiant Priest)
- Spoke to Them (Sermon & Teaching)

Liturgy in the Early Church

St. Justin the Martyr in his work called the "First Apology," writes:

On Sunday, all who dwell in the city or country **gather in the same place.**

The **memoirs of the apostles** and the **writings of the prophets are read,** as much as time permits.

When the reader has finished, **he who presides** over those gathered, **admonishes and challenges them** to imitate these beautiful things.

Then we all rise together and **offer prayers for ourselves...and for all others,** wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandment, so as to obtain eternal salvation.

When the prayers are concluded we **exchange the kiss.**

Then someone **brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides** over the brethren.

He takes them and **offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,** and for a considerable time, **he gives thanks** (Eucharist) and we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he has concluded these prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying, **"Amen."**

When he who presides has given thanks and people have responded, those whom we call **deacons give to those present** the "eucharisted" bread, wine, and water and take them to those who are absent.

Here, we see:

- Assembly in a Church
- Reading passages from the New Testament and the Old Testament
- A Presider (i.e. priest)
- A Sermon
- Litanies, Supplications, Diptych
- Holy Kiss
- Offertory
- Glorifying the Trinity, giving thanks, and "Amen."
- Distribution

How did Liturgy Change?

Codifying the words of the Liturgy

- Original liturgy, as is seen in St Justin Martyr, the words used to offer praise and glory to the Holy Trinity, and to give thanks, were up to the officiating priest. He could pray whatever words he wanted within the structure of giving thanks, and glorifying God.

- In the 4th and 5th Centuries, the time of heresy - some of the heretics were priests or bishops, and they would use the words of their heresy in the liturgy
- So the Fathers wrote the true faith into the Divine Liturgy and standardized the words that were prayed... in the Coptic Church we have three liturgies: St. Basil, St. Gregory, St. Cyril

Liturgy of St Basil	Liturgy of St Gregory	Liturgy of St Cyril
St. Basil	St. Gregory	St. Mark - translated and updated by St. Cyril
Addressed to God the Father	Addressed to God the Son	Addressed to God the Father
Cappadocian Style	Cappadocian Style	Alexandrian Style
All prayers AFTER Epiclesis	All prayers AFTER Epiclesis	All prayers BEFORE Epiclesis
Any Time	Any Time, Usually Feasts	Any Time, Usually Fasts

The Order of Prayers

Old

- Liturgy of the Word
- Creed
- Reconciliation Prayer
- Offertory
- Liturgy of the Faithful
- Distribution

Current

- Offertory
- Liturgy of the Word
- Creed
- Reconciliation Prayer
- Liturgy of the Faithful
- Distribution

The Day of Liturgy

- Sunday is the day of the Lord
 - It is the day of the Resurrection
 - It is the most important day of the week
 - Liturgy on Sunday is **required** for an Orthodox Christian
- The people, out of piety, wanted to celebrate liturgy on Saturday as well because Saturday was honored by the Lord (although it has less status than Sunday)

- The Church allowed them to pray on Saturdays
- The people, out of piety, wanted to celebrate liturgy on the feasts of the saints which would often come on a weekday
 - The Church gave them a lectionary to pray on weekdays as well

Does Liturgy Still Develop?

1. By the consensus of the Holy Synod
 - The Holy Synod consists of every Coptic Orthodox bishop in the world and is the final say on any ritual or liturgical changes
 - Changes take many years or decades to be studied, approved, and implemented
 - No priest or deacon can just decide to change things however he wants
2. To meet the pastoral needs of the people
 - Adding "air" to the Litany of the Travelers
 - Adding "success to the students, jobs to the needy" to the Supplications
 - Litany of the Seasons - Nile River!
3. For practicality
 - Throwing water vs. touching the head of each person

What Doesn't Change?

1. The Doctrine of the Church
2. The Role of the Bishop, Priest, Deacon
3. The Key Components of Liturgy
 - Thanksgiving
 - Reconciliation
 - Institution
 - Anamnesis
 - Epiclesis
 - Distribution

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