

2025-01-21: My Role in Liturgy (OCCM)

Visual Aid

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Introduction

Every Sunday, we come to the liturgy, we attend, we take communion, we go home. Same prayers, same time, same routine, say "Lord have mercy" 100 times, metanoia here, bow down here, sign of the cross here, etc. And it's easy for that to get boring. We might think of the Liturgy as being unchanging or static. Show of hands, who here has gotten bored in liturgy?

I had the idea for this topic because I was standing in liturgy the other day and I was standing with the young children in the deacons' section. And Abouna was praying the Thanksgiving Prayer, and I looked down to the kids and saw that many of them were just looking out at nothing. Some of them are looking at their friends. Some of them are fidgeting. And I thought to myself, as Abouna is saying "Let us give thanks to God the Pantocrator" - how many of us are actually giving thanks? And I looked over to the section with HS and College and saw the same blank expressions, some people on their phones, some people yawning, some people on their watches.

We don't understand the purpose of liturgy. Is the purpose of liturgy just to take communion? If that's the case, why does it have to be so long? Why does it need so many words? Are the words needed to transform the bread and wine into Body and Blood of Christ? Is the Liturgy some magical incantation that can change bread and wine into Body and Blood? Why do I have to be there for that? Why don't we have the priest say the words, make it into Body and Blood, and then we come for the Distribution part? People when they are sick receive Communion without attending the Liturgy - Abouna just brings it to them. Why do we need to attend liturgy to receive Communion?

On top of that, if we're gonna be there for so long, why not make it more exciting? Why don't we borrow from the Protestant Churches with their guitars and drum sets and worship teams? Why don't we sing the songs that we like instead of those old Coptic Hymns that don't "match the times"? Maybe I hear those other songs and I can feel them moving my spirit, sometimes even bringing me to tears. Wouldn't those songs be more effective?

Today we will discuss and explore these questions.

Agenda:

- What is Liturgy
 - Liturgy is the work of the people
 - Liturgy is given by God through the Church
 - Liturgy is holy
 - Set apart from time
 - Set apart from space
 - Set apart from self
- What is my role in Liturgy
 - Participation of the Mind
 - Participation of the Body
 - Participation of the Spirit

What is Liturgy?

Some characteristics of Liturgy:

- Liturgy is the work of the people
- Liturgy is given by God
- Liturgy is Holy ("Set Apart")

Liturgy is the Work of the People...

The word "Liturgy" comes from the Greek λειτουργία meaning "work of the people." λαός means "people" and ἔργο means "work" (like the word ergonomics which is the study of work or specifically the study of work efficiency).

As with many Greek words, this word was used with a specific meaning prior to Christianity. Ancient Greeks used the word to describe a "public service" which was done for the people, by the people. When the Old Testament was being translated to Greek in the early centuries Before Christ, the term was adopted to refer to the ministry of the tabernacle, the temple, God and the name of God.

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"

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. As early as Cain and Abel, we see that God distinguishes between what is acceptable worship, and what is unacceptable worship. In Noah, we see that he is to distinguish 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. It was God who laid out in Exodus how the tabernacle should be constructed - what materials, how much of each material, how they were arranged, etc. It was God who in Leviticus 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. It was God who told Moses how to anoint Aaron for the priesthood, and Samuel how to anoint Saul and David for the kingship. It was God incarnate, the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who 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.

"Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

- Greek word for traditions here is παραδόσεις which is different from διδάχ which means "teachings" (in this verse ἐδιδάχθητε is the Greek for "you were taught")

The Lord is particular about:

1. Who is doing the worship
2. Where they are doing the worship
3. How they are doing the worship

How did God respond to those who wanted to worship in other ways?

1. Their sacrifice was not accepted by Him - such as is the case with Cain who was not intentional about his offering to the Lord. Such is also the case with King Saul who offered a specific sacrifice that it was not his role to offer. These, who did not intend to profane God but did it out of ignorance or even out of haste, were offered many chances for repentance but unfortunately, they did not until the end of their lives.

2. They profaned God - such is the case with Nadab and Abihu the sons of Aaron, who were deliberate in offering profane fire, or the sons of Eli who the Scripture says "were corrupt and did not know the Lord". Or Korah, Dathan and Abiram who rebelled against God's choosing of Moses. These, when they profaned God by intention, and from a position of leadership, were killed. Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire, the sons of Eli were killed in war, and Korah Dathan and Abiram were swallowed by the ground.

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 Holy

What does the word "holy" mean? Set Apart

If I have towels that are used for the drying of the liturgical vessels, they are set apart for that use. Or if I have towels set apart for the Korban, they are set apart for that use. I cannot take those towels and use them to dry my body after a shower. I cannot take the Paten or the Mysteer or the Chalice and use them for my lunch. These things are holy. They are set apart for God.

- The Sabbath was set apart for rest and worship
- The Tabernacle and its furnishings and utensils were set apart for God's worship
- Israel as a nation was set apart to serve and obey God

Liturgy is set apart from the rest of the world in almost every aspect

Set Apart From Time

The world is fast-paced - we have Instagram Reels, and YouTube shorts. We have fast-food and we have drive-thru. We have classes scheduled back-to-back and they have a start time and an end time. We are almost always in a hurry. If you drove to Seattle, it would take 45 hours. If you walked there it would take 45 days. We have planes that can take us there in 6 hours but God forbid it's even 1 hour late. And if it's 3 hours late, I'm complaining and writing an email and demanding my money-back. This is the world we live in.

But the Liturgy transcends all of that. We step out of the world's clock and enter 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, Who is timeless and eternal, Who is not bound by time as we are, Who is the creator of time itself, 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.

Set Apart From Space

When I look around my campus, I'll see flyers for events, I see people tabling for random clubs and hear them calling out, I see people playing games like frisbee or hackie sack at the mall, I see advertisements for restaurants or products, I hear music of the world playing. When I look at my phone, there are notifications to watch a YouTube video or to go back and scroll Instagram, or of news in the world that I might be interested in, or a text from a friend about nothing, or a reminder to do my homework. Again, this is the world we live in.

But the Liturgy transcends all of that. We step out of the world and enter the heavens.

You have heard the term "Liturgy is heaven on earth" - everything in Liturgy is meant to transport you to the heaven. You are surrounded by the icons of the saints and angels - these are not just pictures or decoration, but they are windows into heaven, showing us the saints and angels who are worshipping with us even in that moment. The sound of the hymns and the aroma of the incense are glimpses of the heavenly worship. The architecture, icons and layout of the church are designed to lift you up from your earthly concerns to the heavenly reality.

God, Who is outside of space and matter, Who is not bound by space as we are, Who is the creator of the universe and all that is in it, is inviting us to be present with Him. If I understand my role in the liturgy, then I will find myself taken out of this world and dropped in His world. I leave behind the distractions and I can focus on Him.

The church is not just a physical building, but it is a spiritual space that unites us with the Divine.

Set Apart From The Self

We talked about the external distractions and noise that are related to our space in the world. But what about the internal distractions, noise and chaos?

In the world, I am overwhelmed by my responsibilities - juggling school, work, personal goals, family expectations, friendships, relationships, church service, extracurriculars, etc. I feel like I am spread too thin. I don't have the mental space to focus or even to breathe. I am worried and anxious - about the future (career, health, success, getting into grad school, etc.) and about the past (did I say the right thing, did I make a mistake). I feel regret and guilt from wronging someone, or saying the wrong thing, or falling into sin. I am restless - doom scrolling, keeping up with trends, etc. I have doubts about my faith or my purpose or my identity. I have emotions. I have perfectionism. And on top of all that, I have FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) so even if I had more time, I would fill it with something else, lest I miss out. Even if I am quiet on the outside, the inside is raging with all of this chaos!

The Liturgy transcends all of that. In the Liturgy I can find peace - and specifically, inner peace. The Lord Jesus Christ, who is the King of Peace, will abide in me and I in him. Liturgy gives me a chance

to have silence. To have calmness. To have reflection. To surrender all of my stresses and anxieties and the noise of my life into the hand of the Lord. When I am still, I can open my heart to hear God's voice instead of my own.

If I know my role in the liturgy, then I can leave behind the stress of this world - of work, home, school, and even the stress of entertaining myself. And I can find peace.

What is my Role in Liturgy?

"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30)

We are going to discuss four points here:

- Participation of the Mind
- Participation of the Body
- Participation of the Spirit
- Go in Peace

Participation of the Mind

An imperfect analogy: If I know nothing about Soccer, and you ask me to sit down and watch a 2 hour soccer game, I'm going to get bored. But once I learn about Soccer, and I learn the game, then I will be able to follow what's happening in the game, and I am less likely to get bored. What does it mean to learn the game?

- Experience it
- Be taught about it
- Read about it
- Play it

The same goes for the Liturgy. If you know nothing about the Liturgy or about the Scripture or about the Church History, or about the Gospel - then you will come to the Liturgy and you will be bored.

So our first point here actually starts BEFORE the Liturgy. What is my role BEFORE liturgy.

Learn the Liturgy, Read books. Watch videos. Be observant. Ask questions. There are many ways that we can engage with the Liturgy and with the worship of God intellectually.

If you learn about the Liturgy and its structure and flow, the more you will follow it and be able to follow the story and the rhythm of worship. The more you learn about the different rituals and motions, you will have a better understanding of what is happening. The more you learn of the Scripture, the better you will understand the readings of the day. The more you learn about iconography, the more you will see how the stories of the saints relate to the themes of the Liturgy. The more you immerse yourself in the teaching of the Church - whether it is theology, apologetics, biblical studies, patristics, etc. - the more you will be able to see the coherence of the line between

what the Lord Jesus taught, the disciples preached and the Fathers kept.

Worship is not an action that is void of intellect. Many atheists make this accusation against Christians - that we have foregone intellect and science in favor of faith. No, but rather we recognize that God is the source of all intellect and of all wisdom.

Everything in the Liturgy has a purpose, has a meaning, has a symbol - but it is only with our intellect and our mind, can we recognize these symbols and meanings and purposes.

Be careful of the danger of focusing only on your mind and intellect, without giving any attention to your spirit: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian."
- Evagrius Ponticus

Participation of the Body

The Body is an instrument of worship

"But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1 Cor 9:27)

My body begins to participate even from the night before, when I start my Eucharistic Fast, and when I make sure I get good sleep before Liturgy. If I deprive myself of a healthy amount of sleep before the Liturgy, I will do myself a disservice - my body and my mind will be tired.

Fasting: The Eucharistic Fast serves as a way of reminding us that our physical needs should not overshadow our spiritual needs. By fasting, we are bringing the body to the same level and desire of the spirit, which desires for communion with God. We deny ourselves physical nourishment for a time, to recognize the spiritual nourishment of the Liturgy and the Eucharist

Prostration, Bowing Head: When we prostrate or bow our heads, we perform an act of humility, we lower ourselves before God as a putting off of our ego.

Standing: St Basil, when talking about the traditions we have received, talks about standing as being a sign and recognition of the Resurrection.

Look Towards the East: Looking toward the East is about looking back to our old home which was the Paradise of Eden "in the East" (Genesis 2) and looking towards the Second Coming of Christ who will come from the East.

Sign of the Cross: Making the sign of the cross engages us in the sacrifice of the Cross. As we say in the Doxology for the Feast of the Cross: "The cross is our weapon, the cross is our protection"

Participation of the Senses: The Liturgy intentionally engages all of our senses:

- Seeing the iconography, iconostasis, crosses, vestments, ritual actions
- Hearing the hymns, prayers and readings
- Smelling the incense

- Tasting the Eucharist
- Touching the icons, the crosses, doing the sign of the Cross

Singing: The biggest role that I have in the Liturgy is to sing the hymns and chant the responses. Do you know that a Liturgy cannot be prayed if there isn't a congregant? Abouna cannot pray the liturgy by himself. Abouna and a deacon cannot pray a liturgy by themselves, but they need at least a third person to be the congregation.

Let me sing every "Lord have mercy" and every "Amen" and every response.

Participation of the Spirit

What did the Lord Jesus Christ say to the Samaritan woman? God is Spirit, and those who worship God must worship in... SPIRIT AND TRUTH. If I am worshipping in Spirit and Truth, then each Lord have mercy will be different. In the first one I will be pleading with God for the peace of the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Orthodox Church; in the second one for Pope Tawadros, Anba Youssef, Anba Basil and Anba Gregory; in the third one for Abouna Aaron and Abouna Jerome and the my hegumens and priests and deacons BY NAME; etc.

Because if I say the same Lord have mercy time after time then not only am I not worshipping God in Spirit and Truth, but I am falling into one of the traps the Lord mentioned in the sermon on the mount: "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words." (Matthew 6:7)

Another important aspect of "Worship God in Spirit and Truth" is to take it personally. Imagine that in church I say "pray for the peace of the Church..." and then I go outside and I complain a lot, make problems, argue with the servants or Abouna, disagree about everything, talk about people behind their back, etc.

Or I say in the liturgy "pray for our archpriest Pope Tawadros and Anba Youssef" and "pray for the hegumens, priests and deacons..." and then I leave and go on Instagram to say things against HH The Pope or HE the Metropolitan or the priests

Or I stand in liturgy and say "pray for the air of the heaven" and I walk outside and smoke a cigarette.

How would the Lord Jesus Christ respond? Am I really worshipping in Spirit and Truth?

Participating in the Spirit means to close my eyes and pray.

I mentioned in the beginning the reason that I thought of this topic to give to you all today - ask yourself in every liturgy. While Abouna is praying the Thanksgiving Prayer, what am I thankful for? How can I express my Thanksgiving to the Lord? And pray those words.

When you find yourself in the litanies and the deacon tells you "pray for the peace of the Church" - pray for the internal peace of the Church. Pray for the external peace of the Church. Pray for the unity of the Only Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Pray for those who have separated

themselves from the Orthodox Faith.

When you hear the deacon telling you "pray for the holy gospel" - pray for the spread of the gospel message to those who haven't heard it; pray for the hearts of those listening to be opened to the gospel message (starting with your own heart);

When you hear the deacon telling you "pray for the Pope and Bishops" - pray for them by name. "Remember O Lord Your Servant HH Pope Tawadros II. Protect him, guide him, give him Your wisdom, let him do your will, keep him for many years on his throne, extend his life. Remember O Lord Your Servant HE Metropolitan Youssef. Protect him, guide him, give him Your wisdom, let him do your will. Give him more time in the day. Calm the hearts of our diocese. Give him a time for rest. Take care of his health.

When you hear the deacon telling you "pray for the salvation of the world"

When you hear the deacon telling you "pray for our kings and leaders, our government and our military"

When Abouna says "He will appear to judge the world in righteousness and give each one according to his deeds" the congregation cries out "According to YOUR Mercy O Lord not according to my sins." Because this sentence is dealing with MY salvation. It's a prayer - Lord I don't agree with this judging according to deeds because if you judged me according to my deeds alone I would not have eternal life. But judge me with YOUR MERCY. - I am saying this out loud and I am pleading with God. I am not just singing a hymn

This is my main role in the Liturgy. The participation of my spirit. This is why the liturgy starts with: "Lift up your hearts"

Go in Peace

At the end of Liturgy, Abouna says "Go in peace"

Communal prayer enhances personal prayer; personal prayer enhances communal.

Sometimes I make the excuse not to pray at home because "I don't know what to say" or I pray but I find that my words are few and they just feel like empty words. Let me influence my private prayer with communal prayer - I can remember the Litanies and pray based on them. I can also just pray Psalms and hymns from the liturgy or the praises!

At the same time, this will enhance my time in liturgy because I become conditioned to prayer and to the words of prayer.

Embody the peace you received and go out and carry it in your life and interaction. I can't leave the liturgy and go argue with my brother. I can't leave the liturgy and go and curse and watch inappropriate movies or listen to music unbecoming of me as a Christian. My mom used to say "omal betrou7 El kenesa leh" (well in that case, why are you even going to church).

Sunday being the day of the Lord, it's good for us not to have work and that isn't just so we can attend liturgy, but so that we can go in peace after. To visit our brethren and visit the sick and serve the poor. To go and help our parents and our friends. This is how we take the peace that we received, double it and give it to the next person!

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