

Site Visit:

Service Study of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Worship Traditions

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Introduction

In the Christian faith, there are a large variety of worship traditions that express a very different way to “do” worship. For an individual growing up in one tradition, it can be very easy for them to believe that worship in their traditional upbringing is the only way; the natural way. However, perhaps more than there being one true way of worship, there are just various manners that elevate a unique perspective of the character of God? Perhaps these different traditions offer the worshipper a whole new way to experience God that may encompass more, if not all, five senses? This paper will explore the worship traditions of Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches. The Roman Catholic church follows a liturgical year that culminates in the Easter vigil, which is celebrated on the night before Easter Sunday; many people show up to Mass the following Easter morning.¹ Traditionally, mass begins with introductory rites such as a penitential act, glory to God, and collection of offering. Liturgy of the Word follows where there are multiple readings, typically from the Old Testament, New Testament, Psalms, and the Gospels. After the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist follows with gifts, incense, and the altar being prepared for Holy Communion. Following communion, there are concluding rites of greetings, blessings, and dismissal.² The Orthodox church also follows a liturgical year with Easter being the culminating highlight. Orthodox Easter falls a week later than Catholic Easter. In the Orthodox church, there is only one Eucharistic service on Sunday called the Divine Liturgy. However, leading up to this, there are several short preparatory services and an hour-long service of Matins. The Matins is the morning service of the Church, opening with six morning Psalms.

¹ Kosloski, Philip. 2021. “A Step-by-Step Guide to the Easter Vigil.” Aleteia — Catholic Spirituality, Lifestyle, World News, and Culture. March 29, 2021. <https://aleteia.org/2018/03/31/heres-a-step-by-step-guide-to-the-easter-vigil/>.

² “Order of Mass | USCCB.” n.d. Wwww.usccb.org. <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass>.

As there are no breaks between these services, the duration and connectivity of the service is rather expansive.³ Overall, there is a similar order of prayer, worship, some call and responses, a short teaching, and Holy Communion. Icons are evidently venerated more predominately in Orthodox churches in comparison to other worship traditions. Towards the beginning and the end of the worship service, people can be seen touching and kissing the image of Jesus before the altar. In exploring the worship traditions of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, observations from both services regarding liturgical flow, sacraments, and overall atmosphere will be presented and compared. To conclude, critical evaluation will be given as to the faithfulness of the services to Scripture and historical tradition. Also, the effectiveness of the service as a pathway to experience God along with the service's clarity in communication towards the congregation will be evaluated.

Roman Catholic Worship Tradition

The following observations were made from a livestream of Easter Mass in St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Las Vegas. The Mass was led by the Most Reverend Gregory Gordon, the Auxiliary Bishop of Las Vegas, and Deacon Rick Minchlit.

The mass was easy to follow and smooth in liturgical flow. The service lasted close to one hour beginning with a triumphant worship song led by a choir of all young girls and an adult woman on a microphone behind a pulpit towards the left of the stage. All throughout the worship service, there were several songs led by the choir with several call and responses in remembrance of sins, thankfulness to God, and other variously themed prayers. The choir was accompanied by

³ Mathewes-Green, Frederica. "First Visit to an Orthodox Church: Twelve Things I Wish I'd Known | Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese." n.d. <http://ww1.antiochian.org/content/first-visit-orthodox-church-twelve-things-i-wish-id-known>.

a single pianist who professionally played flawlessly and without any sheet music. The Auxiliary Bishop walked in with white robes surrounded by about four others in white robes who were holding candles and a small totem of Jesus on a cross. There was a long wooden table about 10 feet long in the middle of the stage with a white cloth laid across it. It seemed clear that this would be where the offerings, Holy texts, and other important items would be placed.

Throughout the service, the Most Reverend and Deacon would also hold a thurible from chains and wave it around in a ritualistic manner to release incense accordingly throughout the room. This thurible was waved back and forth in rhythmic movements of three, releasing aroma strategically and intentionally. This movement was done during the Sacrament of the Eucharist, when two gold plates and a single chalice were placed on the middle table. The Most Reverend elevated these plates and bread towards Heaven, and then pulled out a wafer-like cracker to partake of Communion himself. He would then elevate and drink from the chalice. Deep reverence was taken throughout these sacraments and even often when passing the middle table, the leaders would bow slowly and at some points in the sacrament, they would get on their knees and bow down. People would be encouraged to participate in the Communion by being called up to partake of the bread following this. During the Sacrament of Baptism that also took place, a volunteer in white robes would also follow the Most Reverend around with a metal pail of water with a smooth stick in it. The Most Reverend would take the stick and sprinkle water three times towards the congregation in three different spots in the right side, middle, and left side of the room.

As it was Easter, the mood was joyful and participation was encouraged all throughout the service with singing, communion, baptism, and the various call and responses. There were not many pictures on the wall and the stage was generally kept spacious aside from the clothed

table, the choir towards the left with the worship leader's pulpit, and the preacher's pulpit. There were chairs on the right side for the leaders to sit down as well. The activities that garnered the most attention in the service were the sacraments. The level of reverence and ritualistic respect heightened as the leaders would bow frequently, elevate items to Heaven, and build anticipation towards the embodiment of Christ in these items and the desired participation of people to taste and see that He is good. What was also interesting was that often after a prayer or scripture was read, there would be a calm moment of silence; an intentional pause in the flow of the service to sit and seemingly wait on the Lord.

Another interesting observation was that the duration of the sermon seemed no longer than ten minutes. The Most Reverend Gregory spoke on the distinction between Mary and John's reaction to the empty tomb of Jesus. Mary was filled with fear that someone had taken Jesus's body; John was filled with faith that Jesus had risen. From this single point, the Most Reverend proclaimed to be like John, choose faith, and be bold witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. He pointed out that Jesus did not appear to multitudes because that work was left for the chosen witnesses, His believers. The entire sermon seemed to have been written down and was read behind the pulpit. Nearly all the elements of the service, the prayers, the readings, were read and not ad-libbed. The only time that something was not read was when the Most Reverend was thanking the people of the community for their attendance and blessing people as they concluded the service. Overall, the liturgical flow seemed extremely orderly, inviting, and easy to follow. The mood was joyful and the worship setting was simply adorned and decorated. The importance of the sacraments of the Eucharist and baptism were expressed. There was a deep sense of unity and intentionality in all that was spoken and done.

Orthodox Worship Tradition

The following observations were made from a livestreamed Nymphios (Bridegroom) Service at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Rochester, New York. The names of the various leaders were not communicated as in the Roman Catholic church.

The liturgical flow of the service was a bit more difficult to follow as opposed to the Roman Catholic worship service. The service duration based on the livestream was two hours. It was unclear when it officially started but at one point, the head priest stood up, walked to a middle table and began to sing a prayer unto the Lord. The worship service was primarily sung. About 80% of the service as reading from the scripture in a monotone humming tone that droned as a rhythmic chant. There was a large amount of scripture reading and singing that was done in koine Greek as well as English. Since the Greek language was utilized heavily throughout the service, it was sometimes difficult to follow along. The punctuality of the service seemed to be open ended. The service seemed to just start and flow immediately into a time of singing led by scripture readers, the choir, and the priest at varying points. There was an evident flow though as a hand-off of who would be vocally leading a portion would be seamless, thus there were rarely times of silence or stillness.

Although there was not a clear sign of sacraments such as baptism done in this service, there was a heavy emphasis of icons, pictures, and decoration. There were 6 large portraits of Mary and Jesus in the front of the stage. Incense was being released around the table by the priest throughout much of the worship. There was purple cloth on the tables and the floor was a red carpet. There were plenty of candles on the table as well. The choir were dressed in blue robes; the woman leading the scripture as well as the male leadership were dressed in black robes. The primary table where the purple cloth, candles, and specific texts were laid was placed towards the deep back of the stage, behind the 6 portraits but in view between a middle-parted

opening of the icons. In between the 6 icons and the congregation in the pews was another large picture of Jesus that had green flowers and plants decorated along its frame. There was also a seat on the right side of the stage that had four poles rising from it with a dome like gold covering raised high above it. When the gospel was being read, the priest brought a large Bible to the pulpit right behind the picture of Jesus and faced the congregation. The scriptures were sung by the priest as two men in black robes stood on each side of the pulpit holding staffs that emanated blue and red stones.

There was a high level of respect and reverence unto the Lord in the mannerism in which the leadership maintained the flow of the worship. Each movement was intentional with bowing, incense shaking, songs of prayer for forgiveness of sins and burdens, and phrases repeated such as “Lord have mercy”. The bowing before the image of Christ was very solemn and reverent, and the men in black robes even kissed the image of Christ after bowing. At the end of the service, people lined up to kiss and behold the image of Jesus as they left. Participation overall by the congregation was minimal. There was some singing, but even during the Matins, many people stayed seated. However, when the priest and leadership bowed to the image of Jesus towards the end of the worship service, everyone stood and bowed together. Aside from the six portraits of Jesus and Mary on stage and the primary decorated portrait of Jesus in the middle of the room, there was an abundance of artwork along the walls of the service so that images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints were in full display.

The message by the priest was short, less than ten minutes. He spoke on the preparation of the bridegroom through the anointing of Jesus’s feet that took place supposedly the Wednesday before Good Friday. The woman, referred to as the “harlot” in their tradition, was shown to kiss the feet of Jesus and bring Him fragrant oil. Judas was depicted to be thinking of

his kiss of betrayal as he plotted and brought wickedness. The priest pointed out that both the harlot and Judas are in us, and it is crucial that we understand how to respond to Jesus. Believers need his mercy and for Jesus to save us. This led to a time of repentance and repetition of the phrase “mercy” which led to bowing before the image of Jesus.

Comparison & Contrast

Both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox services were similar in their strict adherence to an ordered service. There was intentionality in all the movements and actions of both services of when incense would be shaken around the altars, the manner of bowing before sacraments and icons, and an evident respect towards historical tradition and order. Both services seemed to be punctual in their time in when they would start. There was clearly no waiting for people to come in and get situated. People understood that the service would be starting at a certain time with or without them. Both leaders and volunteers wore robes over their normal clothes, depicting a unified, traditional garb. Call and responses were also used throughout the services in recitation of prayers and scriptures that the congregation knew to partake in actively. Both had similar levels of engagement from the congregation in which participation was encouraged through familiarity in service structure; the people knew what to expect and what to do at specific moments. Also, both services were ordered so that the sermon was less than ten minutes. The sermon was not the highlight for both of the services. What was highlighted were the sacraments and images of Jesus, and the ordered rituals around these items that served to invite people to truly experience Jesus in a way that encountered all five senses. Visually, the robes, flowers, pictures of Jesus, elevated movements of hands when holding the Eucharist items, all captured the congregation’s attention. Aromatically, the incense filled the rooms. Worship and music could

be heard throughout the services. Both services also were able to touch and taste that the Lord was good through icon and in the Eucharist.

There were several items of contrast to note. The Orthodox service had a heavy inclination towards revering icons of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. The Catholic service did not kiss any images or bow before any images of Jesus in the way the Orthodox service did. Also, the Orthodox service featured the choir wearing blue robes and the rest of the leaders wearing black robes. In the Catholic service, the leaders and volunteers all wore white while the choir of young girls wore conservative skirts and dresses. The Orthodox service had several moments where long bouts of koine Greek were spoken while the Catholic service had only some moments of Latin. The Orthodox leadership swung the thurible with incense in a more frequent manner around the altar while the Catholic leaders swung the thurible with incense in rhythmic double swings of three. The Catholic service also had a time of blessing one another and greeting while the Orthodox service did not. The Catholic service seemed more modern in their song choices and sermon message while the Orthodox service seemed more rooted in older hymnal traditions. The culmination of these differences notably brought varying levels of participation. In the Orthodox service, participation was limited to some moments of singing, bowing to and kissing the image of Jesus. In the Catholic service, participation seemed more expansive in inciting participation through singing, the Eucharist, baptism, more call and responses, and the time of greeting. Generally, both services were powerful in their reverence towards God and their respected items in worship.

Conclusion

Both worship traditions were faithful towards Scripture and Historical Tradition. In the Roman Catholic tradition, scriptures from the Old Testament, New Testament, Gospels, and Acts

were read to emphasize that Jesus had risen on that Easter Sunday. The implications of His resurrection in empowering us to be witnesses was heavily expounded upon. Scripture was heeded to in identifying Jesus at the center of our theology, reason, being, and hope. Historical tradition was maintained through the proper exercise of the sacraments of the Eucharist, Baptism, and worship rituals that were passed down generationally through the Catholic church. The prayers that were read in call to response were from an agreed upon text that the Catholic church corporately shares and leads from. The Orthodox tradition similarly emphasized the supremacy of Jesus. Through their worship of Him utilizing the Psalms and the scripture reading of the harlot and Judas's posture towards Jesus, the service was faithful to the word of God and its implications upon people today. Historical tradition was upheld in the usage and veneration of icons, as shown through the numerous portraits in the service and the kissing of the image of Jesus. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox service also spoke in their historically rooted languages of Latin and koine Greek, respectively. Both traditions were faithful to the Scripture and their historical roots.

The Roman Catholic service was effective in inviting worshippers to experience and taste that the Lord is good. Through going through the sacraments of the Eucharist and the baptism, as well as the various call and responses, congregants are invited to partake in the fullness of who Jesus is and the freedom He has given through His death and resurrection. The service order and items used invites and grounds congregants in the intentional, historically rich offering of love that the Church can corporately lift unto the Lord, together. Congregants are enabled to transcend above their individuality into the greater body of the universal church led by our Lord Jesus Christ. The Orthodox service was effective in inviting worshippers to experience and see that the Lord is good. The icons and decorations present all around the service truly brought alive the

image and face of Jesus. The constant flow of music and scripture cultivated an atmosphere of worship that was unceasing and continuous unto Him. Sometimes partaking was a bit more difficult due to the language barrier of Greek; call and responses were less frequent as well, thus spectating sometimes seemed more evident than participation. However even in spectating, congregants and worshippers are prepared to behold who Jesus is through visual, artistic expression, touch, and prostrate reverence.

The meaning of both services communicates that God is closer than people think. People can experience and know the Lord through all five senses of taste, sight, hearing, touch, and smell. Both services fully communicate the reverence with which we are to approach God. Our God is powerful, mighty, sacrificial, and gracious. People have been shown an incalculable mercy that people and all are in need of Him daily. Although different in their emphases on sacraments and icons, both Roman Catholic and Orthodox worship services empower the church to encounter the living God and to be His witnesses to all the Earth.

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