

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is unique to the Orthodox Church, served only on weekdays during the season of Great Lent. It is called *Presanctified Gifts* because the Body and Blood of Christ received by the faithful were *sanctified*, or consecrated, at the Divine Liturgy on the *previous* Sunday and reserved in a special container on the Altar until their reception on the weekday following.

Origins of the Service

This Liturgy originated with the ancient practice of the faithful taking Holy Communion home with them from the Sunday Divine Liturgy.¹ Naturally, prayers accompanied this daily reception of Holy Communion, and this reception was not just private but often done jointly with family and fellow Christians.

The transition from a service at home to a service in the Church took place under the influence of Great Lent when people would gather daily in the Church for Scripture readings and instruction from the Bishop at the time of the evening service of Vespers. This gathering included both the baptized and the catechumens. During Great Lent the catechumens completed their

instruction in the faith prior to baptism and reception into the Church at Pascha.

Prayers for receiving Holy Communion were attached to the readings, instruction, and service of Vespers. In addition to solidifying the community by joint participation in the Presanctified Gifts, this public gathering served an important dogmatic function in regard to the Gifts of Christ's Body and Blood. The bread and wine changed into the Body and Blood of Christ during the previous Sunday Divine Liturgy *remained* the Body and Blood of Christ apart from the Sunday Liturgy and did not revert back to ordinary bread and wine during the week. As the flesh of Christ was deified in union with His divine nature, the Presanctified Gifts retain their blessing just the same.

Authorship

St. Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome (d. 604), is credited with the authorship of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. St. Gregory spent some time in the eastern Roman capital of Constantinople and faithfully maintained Orthodox liturgical practice. St. Gregory, in fact, introduced the practice of the Presanctified Liturgy into the Roman Church, specifically on Holy Friday after the adoration of the Cross to confess "that the Body of Christ, after His death, remains the Life-bearing

¹ See references in *Evening Worship*, by Nicholas Uspensky, trans. Paul Lazor, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), pg. 116f.

body of the God-man.”² Because of his prominence in the Church, St. Gregory’s name is attached to this Liturgy.

The forty-ninth canon of Council of Laodicea (ca. 350) states: “During Lent the Bread must not be offered (i.e., the Divine Liturgy) except on the Sabbath Day (i.e., Saturday) and on the Lord’s Day (i.e., Sunday) only.” This is repeated with elucidation in the fifty-second canon of the Quinisext Council (*in Trullo*; 692): “On all days of the holy fast of Lent, except on the Sabbath, the Lord’s Day, and the holy day of the Annunciation (i.e., March 25), the Liturgy of the Presanctified is to be said.”³

These canons attest to practices already in place in the Church. The Orthodox Church still to this day during the season of Lent serves the Divine Liturgy (in Roman Church parlance, the *Mass*) only on the more festive, less solemn Saturdays and Sundays and Feast day of the Annunciation. On the weekdays of Lent, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is served according to the ancient practice, which is attested by the Fathers of the Church, most notably among them St. Gregory the Great of Rome.

Food for the Journey

“[May we] be united to Thy Christ Himself, our true God, who has said, ‘Whosoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him, that by Thy Word, O Lord, dwelling within us and sojourning among us, we may become a temple of Thine all-holy and adorable Spirit’ (Litany before the Lord’s Prayer). “Grant unto also, O Good One, to fight the good fight, to complete the course of the fast...” (Prayer before the Ambo).

The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts provides food for the journey of Great Lent, the Daily Bread of Christ Himself for our pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. We are strengthened in our solemn daily walk of fasting and prayer to yearn for the Promised Land of the Resurrection of Christ.

Springing from the practice of home-communion and instruction in the Word of God, participation in the Presanctified Gifts testifies to the reality that we ourselves are being transformed in communion with Christ into the divine people of God, no longer merely of this world (cf. John 17:14-19). The sanctification of God given in Baptism always remains active within us, and His grace increases within us as we strive to conform our lives to Christ.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 155.

³ “The Seven Ecumenical Councils,” Second Series, Vol. 14, in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 155, 389.