The Ordering of Divine Worship

# Sunday Vespers and Orthros

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There is little dispute that from its earliest days, Christianity drew heavily upon and then developed, ways of worship that originated in the Judaism from which it was to emerge in the first century AD. The roots of

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that tradition, deeply rooted in the liturgical directions of the Old Testament, produced a way of divine worship that was first and foremost **ordered.** Similarly, the writings of St Paul, the earliest in the New Testament, make it abundantly clear that the gatherings of believers meeting for worship, should be in accordance with apostolic teaching and regulation, and were to be marked by a sense of good order. *"For* **God is not the author of** *confusion,"* Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor.14:33,40). *"Let* **all things be done decently and in good o***rder."*

But this ordering of worship is not, therefore, stultified; worship in Orthodox Christianity has never been exactly static, contrary to much popular perception. However, from what might be termed the **proto-liturgical** days before the formation of the New Testament canon, down to this very gathering in our own day, Orthodox worship has a clear, recognisable and definable ethos. To the modern western mind it is exotically oriental but

in fact, so are the mind, form and style of the holy scriptures themselves and it is with the Bible that we shall start this investigation of how evening and morning worship is ordered in our tradition.

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The Liturgical day, like the days of Creation story in the book of Genesis, begins at sunset; not midnight nor at sunrise but as the sun goes down: quite logically, the ending of one day is the start of the next. All the elements of this creation are seen in the Orthodox Christian mind as symbolic, pointing beyond themselves. Thus the natural course of the day signifies our own death and resurrection and invites us, as one day closes to begin the next with the worship of our Creator and Saviour. This evening start to the day has largely been forgotten in the western liturgical traditions for, whereas their liturgical days starts with matins or morning prayer and ends with vespers and compline, ours begins at Vespers through to the following Ninth Hour. (In fact there is further confusion in the western tradition in the Roman Rite where Sundays and solemn feasts have a first and second vespers, thus conflating two ways of calculating the day!) And so, as in the biblical creation, we start with the first day of the week, the Lord's Day or Sunday. Certain Protestant traditions have made a grave error in labelling Sunday 'The Sabbath', an notion

based on a misreading of the biblical record. The Biblical Sabbath is, of course, Friday evening to Saturday evening, the last day of the week.

Therefore, we begin with Vespers on the Lord's Day; that is, on Saturday evening, in preparation for the Divine Liturgy which will follow in the morning.

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It is, then, as part of our preparation for participation in the Liturgy that we must promote and encourage attendance at both Vespers on Saturday evening and Orthros on Sunday morning. There is, of course, ample historical evidence for the popularity of the Vigil, the watching service amongst the early Christians, forms of which are with us to this day. The original motivation, here, is not only personal religious devotion but a far more dynamic expectation among the first Christians of the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ. Such as vigil is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, taking place at Troas where, as you will recall,

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the unfortunate Eutychus, overcome by sleep, falls from a window, to be revived by St Paul. (Acts 20:7-12) Paul is still speaking,we are told, at midnight; that is, between Saturday night and Sunday morning, at the end of which there was the Breaking of Bread. The idea behind this is the hope for Christ's return, **coming like a thief in the night** and that his Second

Coming, being delayed, there is consolation for the believers in receiving the Holy Gifts. As Christ himself says in Mark's gospel:(Mk13:35-37) **Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning— lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all:** *Watch!"*

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We should also bear in mind that for slaves among the early Christians, the night time was the only time they might be at liberty from toil and were free to worship with the Church. The challenge for us is to persuade our fellow believers of the real value of Sunday as a liturgical whole; that is, from Saturday evening until the fellowship-gathering in the church hall after the Liturgy, we can be liberated from enslavement to the usual worldly distractions and entanglements.

## Vespers

So let us begin with Saturday evening Vespers and how it is

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ordered in the Antiochian way. Ideally, assisting the priest will be a chanter or choir as well as a server in the altar to attend to the censer. If the parish has a deacon he will, of course, assist the priest. The priest wearing rason and exarason, prepares as described in the **Liturgikon**,

puts on the Epitrachelion and opens the curtain and the Holy Doors which remain open during the rest of the service.

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Following the exclamation *'Blessed* **is our** *God…'* by the Priest, the chanter sings *'O* **come, let us w***orship…'* Now, Psalm 103 is chanted, a celebration of the Creator's work, linking Vespers with the first day of the six-day Creation in Genesis: '**Then God said,** *"***Let there be** *light";* **and there was** *light…So* **the evening and the morning were the first** *day'* (Gen.1:3-5). During Psalm 103 the Priest recites the seven prayers at the lighting of lamps quietly at the Holy Table. These might originally have been prayers cited after particular Psalms and are worthy of being better known; the seventh is particularly beautiful.

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At the end of the Psalm the deacon exits the altar to stand before the iconostasis and intones the Great Litany.

Next comes the first 'sitting' or **Kathisma** of the Psalms, that is Psalms numbers one to eight, divided into three sections. The psalter is divided liturgically into twenty kathismata, of which the first is generally used at Saturday Vespers. At the final doxology after Psalm eight, the deacon exists the altar once again for the Little Litany.

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What follows should be considered the very core of Vespers. The use of Psalm 140, '**Lord, I have** *cried…'* is virtually universal at evening prayer in the early liturgical history of Christianity. It recalls the late afternoon offering of incense in the Jerusalem temple, perhaps originally, the nostalgic prayer of a Jew taken as a Babylonian exile and longing to return. As such it represents our longing, like Adam, to return to paradise, or rather, to find the heavenly Jerusalem. It is at this point that the priest puts on the phelonion whilst at the words, *'Let* **my prayer** *arise…'* the deacon begins the Great Censing of the Altar and the Nave [see the diagram in the printed information] whilst the chanter continues with Psalm 140,141,129 and 117. Generally on Saturday evenings ten **stichera** or thematic verses are appointed to be chanted between the psalm verses, beginning after *'Bring* **my soul out of** *prison…'* The first seven of these will be according to the **Tone** of

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the week from the **Octoechos** that run over an eight-week cycle. Appropriately for Sunday, the theme throughout is Christ's resurrection. For example, the third stichos for Tone Three says:

*'By* **Thy Resurrection, O Lord, the universe hath been filled with light and Paradise hath been opened again, while all creation, singing Thy praise, each evening offers hymns unto** *Thee.'*

The last three stichera are for the saint of the day and are drawn from the from the **Menaion** in the tone noted there.

The **Doxastikon** is chanted, usually for the saint from the Menaion, whilst during the singing of the **Theotokion,** usually taken from the Octoechos. Attention needs to be paid to the **Typikon** here: if only one of these is appointed, then **Glory** *to…* **and now and ever..** is chanted straight through beforehand. It is during the Theotokion that there is a procession led by the Deacon, holding the censer, the priest saying quietly the prayer of the entrance. At this point, the Priest, still vested in the Phelonion, is the icon of the incarnate Christ, coming into the nave as our Lord coming into the world.

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Coming before the Holy Doors, the entrance is blessed by the priest and the evening hymn of praise, Phos Hilaron**,** is chanted. If the priest is serving alone, he makes the sign of the cross with the censer as he sings: *'Wisdom.* **Stand** *upright!'* He now censes the principal icons on the screen and re-enters the altar at that point or at the words: *'Now* **that we have come to the setting of the** *sun…'* If there are several priests they wait for the hymn to finish and then go in. Alongside Psalm 140, the evening hymn Phos Hilaron is the other core element of Vespers found in early Christian worship. Indeed, St Basil the Great, commenting on the use of

this hymn, says it was regarded as ancient even in his day. Written perhaps around 150 AD, this simple and direct hymn has been in continuous daily use among us and might properly be a part of Orthodox Christian evening prayer at home as well as at church. It is an expression once again of that symbolic interpretation of Creation; a sacramentalisation of a necessary domestic ritual common in the ancient world: the bringing in of oil lamps as the sun sets. This became the **Lucernarium** ceremony, common to Vespers in the west and the east, the vestigial remains of which can still be seen at the Liturgy of the Presanctified at the words, '**The light of Christ enlightens** *all!'*

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The chanter now sings the **Prokeimenon**, following the entry of the clergy. Three psalm verses are appointed for Saturday Vespers with the exclamation, **The Lord is king, he is clothed with majesty.** If appointed in the lectionary, the Old (or, occasionally, New) Testament readings come after the Prokeimenon. Where possible, the proper division of labour should be observed and, if present, the Reader must fulfil his ministry. This is an important principle of the ordering of Orthodox worship, so that the liturgical expression of our life in Christ is a properly hierarchical ministry with each part contributing to the whole.

Exiting by the north door, the deacon now leads the two litanies, between which The Reader recites the evening prayer, *'Vouchsafe,* **O** *Lord…'*

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There now comes the Prayer at the Bowing of Heads. Originally, this was a prayer recited towards the end of Vespers by the bishop, as noted in the famous account of the fourth century liturgy at Jerusalem by the western nun, Egeria. It is important and worth reminding people, that the ritual commands issued by the deacon should be followed and that here, for example, all should bow their heads during the recital of the prayer until the doxology, '**For thou art a good** *God…'*

Next, The **Aposticha** verses are sung, usually in the tone of the week. These are dismissal Troparia, the final hymns of Vespers and are interspersed with the verses already used at the Prokeimenon. The usual pattern is shown in the printed information. **[s15**

During the Aposticha verses the deacon removes his vestment and the priest his Phelonion.

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The New Testament canticle, **Nunc Dimittis,** The Hymn of Simeon, is now chanted in common with Vespers of the Western Rite. We might see this as a final act in the drama of salvation re-enacted throughout the evening service from the story of Creation (Ps 103), the expulsion of Adam (the Litanies before the closed Holy Doors); the proclamation of the light of Christ through his incarnation (The Entrance and evening hymn, Phos Hilaron). The words of Simeon express gratitude for having lived to see the coming of the Messiah. Fittingly sung here as we go to our rest at the end of one day and looking forward to the Divine Liturgy on Sunday morning, this hymn serves to point us towards our own departure from this life and and our own resurrection, symbolised in the cyclical rhythm of the nighttime followed by sunrise.

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Vespers now draws to a close with the Trisagion Prayers and, anticipating the dawn, the Troparion of the Resurrection according to the tone. '**Glory** *be…'* is followed by the troparion for the saint of the day; *'Both* **now and** *ever…'* is followed by the Theotokion, normally from the Octoechos.

The final dialogue between priest and chanter contains the hymn, **More Honourable** to the Theotokos with the priest standing outside the

altar before her icon on the screen. At the Great Dismissal the full blessing, invoking all the ranks of the saints, should be used.

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## Orthros

We now come to the second part of this lecture: Orthos, Matins or morning prayer on Sunday morning. If the underlying themes of Vespers were Creation, Fall and Redemption, then a careful reading of the form and variable texts of Sunday Orthros presents us with the resurrection of Christ.

Like Vespers, our order of Orthros is a conflation of two streams of liturgical forms: the popular daily services served in the great churches of the late Roman Empire, called by scholars the **cathedral office** and the forms of regular prayer, often based around the continuous recitation of the Psalter, from the monastic traditions. The elements popular among lay Christians living in those early centuries of the Church were litanies, rituals, processions, hymns, antiphons and blessings; from the monastic traditions came the regular recitation of the Psalter and the Lectio Divina, the schematic reading of the holy scriptures.

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If the Divine Liturgy is to follow straight after Orthros, it is common practice now for the clergy to perform the **Kairon,** vesting and **Pros-komidia** before beginning Orthros. Alternatively, the Proskomidia can be done by the priest during Orthros itself whilst the chanter is continuing the longer sung parts of the service. Properly speaking, Orthros is served before vesting and Proskomedia, with the priest wearing the Epitrachelion.

The service begins with the Holy Doors being opened and the curtain drawn back - an interesting link with the resurrection here. Orthros is originally part of a night vigil, recited in the early hours whilst still dark. The doors, like Christ's tomb, once sealed, are now thrown open at this point. The initial blessing by the priest is chanted: *'Blessed* **is our** *God…'* and *'O* **heavenly** *King…"* then the reader continues with the Trisagion Prayers. Here, the Liturgikon directs the priest to do the Great Censing of the altar and nave while the chanter continues with the Troparia of the Cross. The petitions of the short litany with triple Kyrie are chanted by the priest, whilst he censes around the holy table and the **Prothesis table,** then over the gospel book in the form of a cross, as directed, singing aloud: *'Glory* **to the holy,** *consubstantial…'* This is one of those parts of the service where it is important here that the priest learn the words of these prayers by heart, so that he is not encumbered with a book whilst censing. In fact, experience will show over the course of a liturgical year

what needs to be committed to memory. This, by the way is also sound advice for chanters and Readers, as well as those preparing for ordination. It is no bad thing for any lay person, also, at least to know the Trasagion Prayers by heart. Incidentally, the best way to learn anything like that is to include it regularly in ones daily prayers. Actually, it does not take long to learn Psalm 50 by heart and, as an ex-Anglican, I still have Coverdale's beautiful translation in my head!

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The priest now reads the first six morning prayers quietly at the Holy table, the equivalent of the Prayers of Light at Vespers. At the same time, the Reader/chanter recites Psalms 3, 37 and 62. The last of these, *'O* **God, my God, unto Thee I rise early at** *dawn…'* was used almost universally in early liturgical practice during morning prayer, just like Psalm 140 was used in the evening, as we saw earlier. It cannot be over-stressed that in sharing in these services we are only the latest in a profoundly ancient stream of unbroken Christian prayer, using elements reaching back in form to those very foundations of the faith.

During the first doxology the priest exists by the north door and stands before the icon of Christ on the screen to recite the final six prayers. Meanwhile, Psalms 87, 102 and 142 are recited. When the priest has

finished the twelfth prayer, he venerates the icon of Christ on the screen and re-enters the altar.

Following the psalms, the deacon exists the altar to chant the petition of the Great Litany, after which *'God* **is the** *Lord…'* together with its verses, is sung to the proper tone to be followed by the Troparia and Theotokion used on the previous evening.

After a Little Litany we have the Kathismata. These are poetic

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hymns, also according the tone in use and are intended to be recited as a reflection upon the resurrection between sections of the Psalter; the psalms are omitted in parish use. The Kathismata hymns may be read in a plain voice, rather than chanted.

Now come the Evologitaria or 'blessings' in tone 5, in praise of Christ's resurrection. They have the refrain, *'Blessed* **art thou, O Lord, teach me thy** *statutes.'* Then are sung another Little Litany, the **Hypokoe**, the **Anabathmoi** and **Prokeimenon**. These lead us onto the dialogue of introduction to the Resurrection Gospel between the chanters and the priest. There is an intriguing rubric to be followed here.

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We have a cycle of eleven Resurrection gospels and, whereas a priest would normally read the gospel from the Holy Doors, for these

**Eothinon** or ‘dawn gospels’ the priest must stand on the south side of the holy table, facing north. The point being expressed here is that the table represents Christ’s tomb and the priest is like the angel in the gospel (and as shown in the icon) proclaiming the resurrection to the Holy Myrrhbearers.

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The priest now recites **In that we have beheld the resurrection of** *Christ…’* and while the Reader continues with Psalm 50, if you are in the congregation, you now come forward in turn to kiss the gospel book and the priest’s hand. Two points to note here are that the 50th Psalm is again one of those very ancient elements appointed widely for use at morning prayer. Secondly, this greeting is not merely an exercise in polite etiquette; the gospel book **is** the prime icon of Christ in the temple and here the faithful are greeting the risen Christ. Clearly, Pascha, the original Christian feast, resonates on every Sunday of the year.

Psalm 50 is followed by verses which, according to the calendar, can have variations for certain feasts. The standard one is: *‘Jesus,* **having risen from the grave as he foretold, hath given unto us life and great** *mercy.’* Incidentally, the hand-out with this lecture contains basic guidance for those responsible for finding the correct variable texts and music. There is also a exemplar given for Vespers for a Sunday in tone three.

What comes next is the Intercession which is in fact an invocation of the prayers of various saints. There are, I've noticed, variations of the list according to the jurisdiction concerned. At Poole we use one focusing on the British saints and in particular, the saints of Wessex.

The Singing of the **Canon** that follows is subject to a variety of approaches, according to the tradition. The normal way in Antiochian parishes is to begin with the appointed **Kontakion**, **Oikos** and **Synaxarion.** These are followed by the **Katavasias,** where only the **Irmosi** are actually chanted.

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During the Ninth Ode the deacon does the Great censing. Ordinary Sundays will have the verses of the Canticle, the Magnificat here, interspersed with the hymn *'It* **is truly meet to bless** *thee…'* sung as a refrain. A point that can be made here regarding our practice is that, although the choir alone should chant the variable parts of the services, there are parts in which the congregation should join - and this is one of them.

We now have another Little Litany, the chant, **Holy Is the Lord our God** three times and the **Exaposteilarion** or **hymn of light.** If you listen carefully to the words here, you will see that they reflect upon the Resurrection Gospel that was read earlier in the service.

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The part sung next is called the **Ainoi** or Praises, the remains, historically, of the office of Lauds as found in the Western Rite, a separate service from Orthros or Matins. Remember, Orthros is originally a service of the dark, early hours of the morning. What followed was Lauds or Praises as the sun arose. Here verses from praise psalms are interspersed with eight resurrection Stichera or verses appointed according to the tone of there week, followed by a Doxastikon and Theotokion, the latter usually being, *'Most* **blessed art thou, O virgin** *Theotokos…'*

The conclusion of the service consists of The Great Doxology, two litanies, Prayer at the Bowing of Heads and the standard conclusion and dismissal. In practice, when the Divine Liturgy is to follow straight after Orthros, these parts can be said quietly at the holy table during the singing of the Great Doxology so that, when the chanter has finished, the Liturgy can begin immediately.

## Conclusion

In drawing these observations and reflections to a conclusion, we can notice not only the historical context and provenance of our tradition of worship but I should like to stress also our corporate liturgical responsibilities, duties and obligations. In other words, the whole of the liturgy is something to which we are all connected; each, from the episcopate to the catechumenate has his or her own liturgy, that is, public service:

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we all offer the sacrifice of praise, according to what we are in the Church, as we have opportunity. Yet ordering our worship is not just a matter of forms and content but is, I think, also about our own spiritual discipline; of having a rule of prayer appropriate to our place in the body of Christ. This is surely to be taught among us, so that whether we are together in church or alone before our own icon corner at home, we are aware that we never pray alone. Yes, ideally, preparing to receive the Holy Gifts on a Sunday would entail attending Vespers, Confession at times through the year or as necessary, reading Compline and the pre-communion Canon, fasting from midnight, reciting the office of Preparation for Communion, attending Orthros and then the Divine Liturgy. And not forgetting to recite the Prayers of Thanksgiving afterwards: a high word-count indeed! The reality is that most people in our parishes just attend the Divine Liturgy and regularly they come in late! Nevertheless, pastors and catechists are right to propose that our Sunday worship, our keeping of the Lord's Day, is the centre from which the rest of our daily lives are to be lived, the **first** day of the week, starting again, continual repentance, again and again, new in Christ.

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There will always be devout souls who know this and who will witness to this. Their coming to Vespers and Orthos is not just support for their clergy but a stepping aside from ordinary Time. Whilst the world continues at its feverish pace and the frenetic noise of electronic communication and commercial and political and social busyness rushes on, we can stand apart, step outside created Time and enter God's Time. In all our vast liturgical literature the two most important phrases are both found in the Divine liturgy itself: '**Blessed is the** *kingdom…'* and later on, *'Lift* **up your** *hearts…'* for when the Church prays in unity, ordered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom has come, we dwell already in the heavenly places and anticipate, whilst our feet yet stand upon earth, the future things. As Theodore of Mopsuestia wrote:

**'We are ordered to perform in this world the symbols and signs of the future things so that, through the service of the Sacrament, we may be like men who enjoy symbolically the happiness of the heavenly benefits and thus acquire a sense of possession and a strong hope of the things for which we** *look.'*