

Orthopraxis

What Happens When An Altar Table Is Consecrated?

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

The service begins with reading of Psalm 143, followed by reciting of petitions and prayers. The people and singers, led by the bishop, who, carrying the covered diskos on which the holy relics have been placed, and priests, make a procession around the church three times, reminiscent of the three processions around the font at baptism. Each time the procession reaches the front of the church, the bishop places the diskos with the holy relics on a table placed there earlier and reads from the Holy Scriptures.

After the third procession is completed, the bishop chants a dialogue from Psalm 24 as he enters the church; this represents Christ the King entering and taking over the building by defeating the power of the devil. After the dialogue is completed the bishop, holding the diskos on which are the holy relics, makes the sign of the cross and enters the church.

In the early days of Christianity when the Church was heavily persecuted, the Christians met in underground burial places where they celebrated the Eucharist on the graves of martyred saints. After the Church was recognized this custom was continued by placing relics in the altar table during the consecration of the church. This is a reminder that the Church was built on the blood of the martyrs and their faith in the Lord.

After the bishop has entered the church, he continues into the altar. In the altar he places the diskos on the altar table. There he removes the relics and places them in a small box. The bishop then pours holy chrism over the relics, symbolizing the union between our Lord and his martyrs. With prayers and the reading of Psalm 145, the bishop then places the box with the relics in a cavity in the altar table where it is sealed in with a wax/mastic glue that contains fragrant spices as were used by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to anoint our Lord's body before his burial. In this, the holy altar represents Christ's tomb.

After placing the relics in the altar table, the bishop proceeds to the washing and anointing of the altar table. For this purpose the bishop is vested in a special white linen garment over his vestments called a sratchitza or savanon. The baptism of the altar table begins with the prayer of consecration by the bishop, followed by petitions by the deacon. The bishop then is given a basin of water and, with a blessing and prayer, pours the water over the table three times and washes it while Psalm 84 is read. Symbolizing baptism, the table is cleaned by washing and made holy by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

After the table is dried, the bishop sprinkles rosewater on it and continues reading Psalm 51. The assisting priests then dry the table with the antimins. Having anointed the table with chrism, once in the center and on each side, the bishop proceeds to spread the chrism over all the table while reciting a section of Psalm 133. The excess chrism is wiped off by the priests with the antimins, and icons of the four Evangelists are fastened, one at each corner, to the altar table.

While Psalm 132 is read, a white linen cloth, representing the Lord's burial shroud, is laid over the altar table. The cloth, called the katasarkion, is tied on the table with a cord that represents the cord with which our Lord's hands were tied when he stood before the high priests. The katasarkion is permanently installed, to remain as long as the church stands. After washing his hands, the bishop now covers the altar table with a more ornate cover that symbolizes the glory of God and places the other holy articles, including the antimins, Gospel Book, the artophorion, and candle sticks, on the altar table, as the reader reads Psalm 93.

As the consecration service comes to an end, the bishop removes the sratchitza he is wearing and may offer it to be cut up into small pieces that are given to each person in church. Concluding prayers are then offered and the consecration service is dismissed before the first Divine Liturgy is celebrated on the newly consecrated altar.

Focus on the Faith

The Holy Priesthood

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

The sacrament of Priesthood includes three liturgical rites of ordination: to the episcopate, to the priesthood and to the diaconate.

According to the present tradition of the Orthodox Church, bishops are chosen from among the monks. In the early Church there were married bishops: St Paul says a bishop must be 'the husband of one wife' (1 Tim.3;2). However, even in the early centuries, preference was given to monastic or celibate clergy. Thus among the holy bishops of the fourth century St Gregory of Nyssa and St. Spyridon were married, while St Athanasius, St Basil the Great, St Gregory the Theologian, and St John Chrysostom were monks. Priests and deacons in the Orthodox Church can be either monastic or married. However, marriage is possible for clergy only before ordination and only once: those married a second time are not allowed to become priests or deacons.

The ordination into hierarchical ranks has from the apostolic times onwards been accomplished through the laying of hands (Greek cheirotonia). According to the Church's rules, a priest and a deacon must be ordained by one bishop; a bishop, by several bishops (no less than three or two). Ordinations take place during the Liturgy. A bishop is ordained after the singing of 'Holy God' (during the Liturgy of the catechumens); a priest, after the Cherubic Hymn; and a deacon, after the consecration of the Holy Gifts.

Episcopal ordination is especially solemn. A priest who is to be ordained bishop enters the altar through the 'royal doors' and goes three times around the holy table, kissing its four corners; the clergy and the choir sing the troparia from the rite of Marriage. The one being ordained then bends his knees before the holy table, and the hierarchs lay their hands on his head, with the presiding celebrant reading the prayer of ordination: 'The grace divine, which always healeth that which is infirm and completeth that which is wanting, through the laying-on of hands elevateth thee, the most God-loving Archimandrite, (name), duly elected, to be the Bishop of the

God-saved cities, (names). Wherefore let us pray for him, that the grace of the All-holy Spirit may come upon him'. Following this, while Kyrie eleison ('Lord, have mercy') is sung by the clergy and the choir, the first hierarch reads other prayers. The newly-ordained bishop is then clothed in Episcopal vestments, while the people (or the choir) exclaim Axios ('He is worthy!'). This exclamation is the only trace of the ancient practice of the election of bishops by all the faithful.

Ordinations to the priesthood and to the diaconate follow the same order: the one who is being ordained enters the altar, goes around the holy table, kissing its corners, bends his knees (or only one knee, as in the case of a deacon); the bishop lays his hands and reads the prayers of consecration over the newly-ordained; and the latter is then clothed in his priestly (or diaconic) vestments with the Axios sung by people.

The singing of the troparia from the rite of Marriage has a special meaning in the ordination to the hierarchical ranks: it shows that the bishop (or priest, or deacon) is betrothed to his diocese (or parish). In the early Church it was very unusual either for a bishop to change his diocese, or for a priest, his parish. As a rule, an ecclesiastical appointment was for life. Even the Patriarch was chosen not from the bishops of a particular patriarchate, but from the lower clergy, in some cases even from the laity.

The Orthodox Church ascribes a very high significance to the sacrament of Priesthood, for with it the church community receives its new pastor. Despite everything that has been written and said about the 'royal priesthood' of all believers, the Church also recognizes the difference between lay people and an ordained priest, the latter being entrusted with the celebration of the Eucharist, and having the power of 'binding and loosing'. Ordination into a hierarchical rank, be it of bishop, priest or deacon, is not only a change of status for someone, but also, to a certain extent, a transition to another level of existence.

In the Orthodox Church, priests and bishops are regarded as bearers of divine grace, as instruments through which God Himself acts. When receiving a priest's blessing, the faithful kiss his hand as if it were Christ's hand, because it is by Christ's power that he gives the blessing.

From the Fathers

On Guarding the Heart

by St Nicephorus the Hesychast (May 4th)

We must look for a master who is not himself in error: his lessons will show us when we go astray to right or left and our excess in the matter of attention...If you can find no one, pray to God in contrition of heart and with tears, appeal to him in your nakedness and do what I shall tell you.

You know that we breathe our breath in and out, only because of our heart...So, as I have said, sit down, recollect your mind, draw it-I am speaking of your mind-in your nostrils; that is the path the breath takes to reach the heart. Drive it, force it to go down to your heart with the air you are breathing in. When it is there, you will see the joy that follows: you will have nothing to regret. As a man who has been away from home for a long time cannot restrain his joy at seeing his wife and children again, so the spirit overflows with joy and unspeakable delights when it is united again to the soul...

Next you must know that as long as your spirit abides there, you must not remain silent nor idle. Have no other occupation or meditation than the cry of: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!" Under no circumstances give yourself any rest. This practice protects your spirit from wandering and makes it impregnable and inaccessible to the suggestions of the enemy and lifts it up every day in love and desire for God.

But if, in spite of all your efforts, brother, you do not succeed in entering your heart as I have directed, do what I tell you and with God's help you will achieve your end. You know that man's

reason has its seat in the breast. In fact it is in our breast that though our lips are silent, we speak, make decisions, compose prayers and psalms, etc... After putting all thoughts away from this rational power (it can be done; you need only to will it), present to it the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me," and force it to utter these words interiorly, excluding all other thoughts. When in time you will have mastered this practice, it will undoubtedly open for you the entrance to the heart". (PG 147, 961-966; cf. *Writings from the Philokalia*, pp. 32-34).