

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Prospora: Teaching Transformation

by Elissa Bjeletich

God became man so that man might become God. - St. Athanasius

One of the most concrete and wonderful ways children can participate in the life of the Church is to bake the communion bread. Bread-making takes a little while, and it calls for patience, but while our hands are busy, we can teach our children about offering (“prospora”) and transformation, and the ways in which God will change this bread, and will change us, for the better.

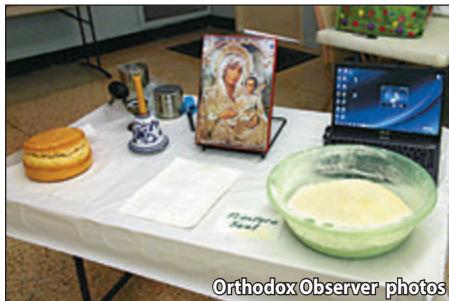
Experienced prospora bakers will tell you that the baker is transformed by the prospora, that the effort opens us to God and invites Him to transform us. Indeed, the whole idea of transformation is quite central to bread baking. Prospora always begins with just four ingredients: wheat flour, water, salt and yeast. Nothing else. Just looking at those ingredients, you know that a transformation must be coming, because this doesn't look anything like bread.

These four simple ingredients all come to us already dripping with meaning from the Scriptures. First, the wheat -- Christ has taught us to recognize that when wheat dies and is buried, it bursts forth from the ground with new life. Wheat is a symbol of resurrection and life. To that we add water, remembering how Christ sanctified the water when He was baptized in the Jordan, and how He explained to the Samaritan woman that the water He offers becomes a fountain of living water inside of us, springing up with everlasting life. Then we add salt, knowing that He called us “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13) because we are the preservers of His covenant and because as Christians we flavor the world—the entire world is made better—flavored by our presence in it.

The fourth ingredient is yeast, which is often discussed in the Scriptures, as “leaven”. You may recall that Christ warned His disciples to “beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 6:16).

He was talking about their doctrine, not their bread, saying that their bad teachings could spread, and like a tiny amount of yeast mixed into a bushel of flour, transform the whole thing.

Having gathered our ingredients, we might remind the kids that during the Great Entrance, when the prospora is offered, the priest calls out: “Thine



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own of Thine own we offer unto Thee on behalf of all and for all!”

Let's think about that. “Thine own of Thine own...” Where did we get this flour? God created wheat; He created all the plants. We take the seeds and we plant wheat in our fields, and we care for it. God gives us seeds and fertile soil, and He rains water and shines warm sunlight, and it grows.

As farmers, we cooperate with God to create these beautiful crops, which feed and nourish us. We then offer a small amount back to Him...we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all.”

We take this flour, this bounty of His harvest, and mix it with yeast and salt and water. The yeast is interesting.

If you put flour and salt and water together, you'll get a really tough dough, something you might use as clay to make Christmas ornaments or something, but you won't get a nice soft bread.

For that you'll need live yeast. Unlike flour and water and salt, yeast is alive, and if you kill it, it won't work. It begins cold and dormant, until you mix it into warm water to wake it up—but if the water's too hot, you'll kill it.

Yeast is alive, like the breath of life that God blew into us to create us: with a breath, He transformed us from clay to living souls, and now the yeast will start blowing into our dough! It creates bubbles, transforming it from a mere ball of clay into a beautiful, fluffy loaf of bread.

Now let's talk about wine. How is wine made? Well, it's not unlike bread. We farm these grapes, these gifts from God, and then we smash them up to make grape juice.

Now what shall we add to make juice into wine? Once again, we add yeast, which triggers bubbly fermentation, blowing air and chemically transforming grape juice into wine.

We take God's simple gifts of wheat and grapes, and we inject our own creative energy, our yeast and our effort, and we transform them into bread and wine, and we take them into the Church. They're not holy yet.

They're just the products of our kitchens, of our hands, but they are offered up in love.

Now what will God do with them? Like we did, He receives our gifts and He adds His creative energy, and He



blesses them in His amazing way. With His mysterious energy, He transforms them into the very body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, we receive the transformed Gifts, the Holy Mysteries, and what happens? They transform us! Through this beautiful Mystery, God changes us, sanctifying and improving us.

Let's show our kids this beautiful cycle of offering and transformation that ultimately transforms us. This is how we should live our lives. God gives us life and blesses us with communities and talents.

When we take those gifts and invest our creative energy and offer them back to the Lord, He will transform them into something even greater, and offer them back to us. Our entire lives can be invested in this process of gratefully receiving and offering back to God, and we will be totally transformed.

The real offering isn't just the bread we bake; it is our own hearts and lives. In that same Divine Liturgy, we will pray, “Let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole lives unto Christ our God.”

How do I offer everything to God? I can offer bread and wine, but how can I offer EVERYTHING? How do I offer myself?

How do I find a way to leave nothing behind, to offer everything that I am, so that He can transform me? We have to look at ourselves and ask which parts of us do not love God. Sure, we'll offer up our hearts to God, but also the part of us that prefers video games to prayers, we'll offer that part up to God too, and the part that wants to make snide remarks about rude people, we'll offer that up too.

Let's find every part of ourselves that shrinks into the shadows and hides from God, and let's bring it out into the light and offer it up to Him, and present ourselves for transformation.

Let's find out what kind of transformation will happen for us when our prospora, our offering, is our entire life.

“Let us commend ourselves and one another...” We can offer more than ourselves: we can offer one another. What does that mean? We can offer the whole world up to God.

Whenever we offer up intercessory prayers, asking that God take care of our

friends and family, we are offering up those people to God.

When we read about a disaster or a war somewhere across the globe, and we prayerfully ask God to watch over and protect the people caught up in it, we are offering those people up to God.

When we offer up our world to Him, we invite Him to transform it. As the dough rises and the yeast does its transformative work, ask the kids to write their lists of names for the priest. Who will we lift up, who will we offer to God's care and keeping at this Divine Liturgy?

May God bless us all as we enter into this beautiful process of offering and transformation, teaching our children to understand the profound beauty of the Orthodox life and the prospora they offer.

Elissa Bjeletich's new book, *In God's Hands: A Mother's Journey through Her Infant's Critical Illness*, is now available at store.ancientfaith.com. Elissa is the mother of five, and the Sunday School Director at Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church in Austin, Texas.

This article is adapted from her podcast “Raising Saints” on Ancient Faith Radio; the full episode is available online at ancientfaith.com/podcasts/raisingsaints.

Making Prospora

2 teaspoons dry yeast

½ cup warm water (warm to touch but not too hot to hold your finger in it)

Mix yeast and sugar in warm water until completely dissolved. Let it sit and almost double in size (45–60 minutes).

1 ½ cups warm water

1 teaspoon salt

6 cups wheat flour

Stir in remaining water, salt, and half of flour. Add remaining flour by hand until dough is firm. Knead until it is smooth and elastic.

Divide dough into 2 balls and flatten in floured pans (no grease). Dip religious seal in flour, shake off excess flour, and press seal firmly in center of dough. Gently lift off seal, and let dough rise until almost doubled in size, about 1 hour.

Prick the corners of the cross with a toothpick, so that the seal stays flat when it's baked.

(Otherwise, the bread may raise more and the seal won't be clear.)

Bake at 400 degrees for about 30 minutes until slightly golden.

Wrap in clean cloth while cooling, so crust will soften.

Prayer after the Prospora is baked

Dear Lord, this bread that I have baked represents each one in my family and in my parish. I am offering myself to You, my very life, in humble obedience and total commitment to You. I place myself on Your holy altar through this bread to be used by You in any way that You feel will help enlarge Your kingdom. Accept my gift and make me worthy to receive the greater gift that You will give me when You consecrate this bread and give it back to me as Your Precious Body. Amen

— From *Making God Real in the Orthodox Christian Home* by Fr. Anthony Coniaris

Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

For more information about the center's ministries please contact the center at:
79 Saint Basil Road
Garrison, NY 10524
Phone: (845) 424-8175
Fax: (845) 424-4172
Email: familycare@goarch.org
Website: www.family.goarch.org

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The Center for Family Care was established with a major grant from the Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Endowment Fund, Inc.

We are grateful for its support.