

# Of Your Mystical Supper

## About the Service of Preparation for Holy Communion and Thanksgiving after Holy Communion

*We thank the Rev. Dr. Alkiviadis Calivas for offering the following elaboration on the discussion in Lesson 5 in the teacher guide for Of Your Mystical Supper.*

Essentially, the Service of Preparation for Holy Communion originated as a collection of prayers for use by pious Christians. In the manuscript tradition and in printed editions, the collection of prayers varied in both type and number. This is a good indication that people were free to select from the collection a prayer or prayers of choice.

Eventually, influenced by monastic use, the collection evolved into a relatively long Service of Preparation and Thanksgiving. This was accomplished by solidifying the set of prayers and by adding several other elements to the collection. These elements include:

- A canon (with the Greek alphabet as its acrostich)
- The Trisagion Prayers
- Three psalms
- Several hymns
- Didactic verses
- Ten prayers attributed to various Church Fathers (the last of which is the well-known "I believe Lord and confess..." attributed to St. John Chrysostom)
- Several verses and hymns attributed to St. Symeon the Metaphrastes



The Service of Preparation is divided into sections meant to be read at different times, reflecting its monastic origins:

- The canon is read on the evening before the Eucharist and Communion, toward the end of the Apodeipnon (Compline) after the recitation of the Creed. The Apodeipnon is read before sleep as the last service of the daily cycle of prayer (which consists of seven intervals and eight services).

- The bulk of the service is read after the usual morning prayers, another sign of its monastic origins. It begins with the Trisagion Prayers, followed by the three psalms (22/23, 23/24, and 115/116:10–19), and the other elements of the service noted above.

- As a person goes forward to receive Holy Communion, he or she is instructed to say the verses and hymns mentioned above,

ending with the hymn of Holy Thursday: "Receive me today..." (*Tou Deipnou Sou tou Mystikou*).

The Service of Thanksgiving after Holy Communion is shorter. It begins with a verse of exhortation and five prayers—three from anonymous authors, one from St. Basil, and one from St. Symeon the Metaphrastes. The concluding prayer, by an anonymous author, is directed to the Theotokos. In the Ieratikon, the service is concluded with the Trisagion Prayers and the apolytikion of St. John

Chrysostom or St. Basil, according to whose Liturgy was celebrated. The service is recited after the Divine Liturgy.

The elements that constitute the service underscore, on the one hand, our unworthiness with pleas for mercy, and highlight, on the other hand, the mystery and meaning of Holy Communion: the awesome gift and privilege granted by our Lord Jesus Christ, who offers Himself to us through the sacramental elements for an intimate union with Him to share in what is divine, namely, immortality and incorruptibility.

The service, in part or in whole, may be read by an individual or by a group of persons. In monasteries, the entire service is read at the appointed times by those who are going to receive Holy Communion.

Clearly, however, the service, whether in part or in whole, should not be interpolated into the Divine Liturgy. It should not be read “privately” during the course of the Liturgy. The Divine Liturgy is an act of the whole Church and requires the undivided conscious participation of the clergy and the laity.

It should be remembered that the Divine Liturgy itself contains several prayers of preparation for and thanksgiving after Holy Communion. As we have received it from historical manuscripts, these

prayer services are an extension and amplification of the prayers of the Divine Liturgy.

Great care should be given not to reduce Communion to a private, personal act requiring private self-preparation. Holy Communion is not an ascetical act for self-edification. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann says it best:

The early Church knew that, in all creation, there is no one who is worthy through his own spiritual effort, through his own “worthiness,” to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, and that therefore preparation consists not in a calculation and analysis of one’s “preparedness” or “unpreparedness,” but in the answer of love to love: That we also, together with all the saints who through the ages have been well-pleasing to You, may become partakers of Your eternal good things, which You have prepared for those who love You, O Lord. (*The Eucharist*, p. 241)

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