



UNDERSTANDING OUR CHURCH RITES

Gerges Gad

St. Mary & Archangel Michael Church, Houston, TX



Church Rites: What are they?

To live the life of heaven on earth, one must live it inside the Church. The Church is filled with beautiful rites. The incense, candles, processions, prayers, chants, and readings are all part of these rich rites.

Rites in the Old Testament were for the purpose of bringing man to God. If one sinned, he brought a sacrifice and presented it to God. However, these rites failed to draw man close to God. In the New Testament, the rites present God to Man. The Bread and Wine are the true Body and Blood of the Lord Christ presented to us, as we pray saying: ***“Behold with us on this table today, Emmanuel our God...”*** (*Fraction Prayer of the Feasts of the Angels*). Through the Church rites God comes to man. The rites are not a burden on our shoulders, but a life; they are there for our service. They bring heaven to us. When laying the foundation of a new Church, we read the Gospel of the Transfiguration, because when we go to Church, we go up the transfiguration mountain

to see the Lord Christ and say with the disciples, ***“Lord, it is good for us to be here.”*** (*Matthew 17:4*)

The rites help us to live the creed of the Church. How can we live the love of God the Father? ***“For God so loved the world that he gave His Only-Begotten Son...”*** (*John 3:16*) We experience this love everyday on the altar. How do we experience the Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Lord Christ? How does the Church make us experience a special (mournful) feeling on Great Friday? How does it make us experience a joyous feeling on Resurrection Sunday? Through the rites!

The rites bring the Holy Bible into life: ***“unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man...”*** (*John 6:53*) How can you live this verse outside of the Church?

The rites unite us together: ***“For by one Spirit we were all***





baptized into one body; whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free; and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:13)

In the Church, we are one united body; each of us is a member – the Lord Christ being the head.

The rites help us live in a heavenly atmosphere: ***“In the world, you will have tribulations...” (John 16:33)*** When a person wishes to leave the tribulations and enter into a “heavenly atmosphere”, where does he go? The Church!

There are no rites in the Church without a meaning! Every rite has a purpose and a meaning. When you experience a rite in the Church, you need to ask two questions: what is the meaning of this rite and how do I benefit from it?

We will study together some of these rites so that we may better understand our Church and live its rich rites.

The Prayers of the Hours

At the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, the priest and deacons wear their service vestments while chanting two psalms:

Psalms 29 (30): “I will exalt You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up...”

Psalms 92 (93): “The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty...”

After this, the priest kisses the hands of his brethren the priests and asks them to assist him in supplication. Then, he ascends to the altar and places the vessels before him and signs them three times, saying, “In the name of the Father...” and “Blessed be God the Father...” He then takes out the vessels and prepares the altar while saying the Prayer of Preparation inaudibly. He uncovers the chalice and arranges it on the altar together with the paten and the spoon. While reciting the Prayer of Preparation, the priest wipes the vessels and arranges them in their places. The priest kisses the altar, and then starts the Prayer of the Hours,

from the Agpia, leading the deacons and the congregation.

What is the Rite of the Prayer of the Hours? Which prayers should be prayed and why?

In the Church, the days fall into one of three general categories:

1. Non-fasting days
2. Fasting days
3. Great Fast, Ninevah’s Fast, and Paramoun days

There are some other exceptions.

1. On non-fasting days (including all Saturdays and Sundays of the year, even during fasting days; also including the feasts of the Lord, and the feasts of the Cross), the Church prays the Third and Sixth hours only.

These liturgies are observed with regular communion abstinence because they are joyous days. The liturgies end around noon, which corresponds to the Sixth hour.

2. On fasting days, like Wednesdays and Fridays, the Church prays the Third, Sixth, and Ninth hours. These liturgies are observed with strict abstinence (no eating or drinking at all) because they are fasting days. The liturgies end later in the afternoon, which corresponds to the Ninth hour (3 pm).

3. During the Great Fast, Ninevah’s Fast, and Paramoun (Preparation) days, the Church prays the Third, Sixth, Ninth, Vespers (Eleventh) and Compline (Twelfth) hours.





These liturgies are observed with a longer period of strict abstinence because they are fasting days of repentance and supplications. The liturgies end around sunset, and so we pray all the hours up to the Compline prayer, which corresponds to 6 pm.

There are some exceptions:

On the Feast of Pentecost, only the Third hour is prayed and only the Gospel is read. The “litanies” after the Gospel are chanted after the reading of the Praxis in the liturgy, during the special prayers of the Coming of the Holy Spirit. The rest of the hours (Sixth, Ninth, Eleventh and Twelfth hours) are prayed in the Prostration Prayers of the Pentecost, in the afternoon.

+ On Holy Thursday, no prayers are prayed from the Agpia. This is the rite of the entire Holy Week as the praise of the Holy Week (ΧΩΚ ΤΕ]ΧΟΜ

“Thine is the power”) is chanted twelve times instead of the twelve psalms of each hour. During Holy Week, our prayers are concentrated on the sufferings of the Lord Christ only, whereas the Agpia hours commemorate all the events in His life.

+ In the Liturgy of Joyous Saturday, only the psalms of the Third, Sixth, and Ninth hours are prayed. Neither the Gospel nor the “litanies” are prayed. Instead, appropriate prophecies and Gospel readings related to the events of the Lord Christ’s burial are prayed.

+ On the three Major Feasts of the Lord - Nativity, Epiphany, and Resurrection - the oblations are offered with the “Chant of Joy” Π ΟΥΡΟ, then the chant “Alleluia of the Offering” is chanted during the examination of the Lamb. No prayers from the Agpia are prayed, as they are prayed in the Paramoun Liturgy(-ies).

You may ask, then when are the rest of the prayers prayed?

They are prayed before the raising of incense. For example, on Saturday morning, before the morning raising of incense, the prayer of Prime (First hour) is prayed, followed by the morning doxology. During the liturgy, the prayers of the Third and Sixth hours are prayed. In the evening, before the evening raising of incense, the Ninth, Eleventh and Twelfth hours are prayed. After the raising of incense, the midnight prayers are prayed, followed by the midnight praises. Thus, everyday the Church prays all the prayers of the hours, fulfilling Christ’s commandment: *“Then He spoke a parable to them that men **always ought to pray...**” (Luke 18:1)*

