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## Life-giving Worship

**It has been said that if you want to know what the Orthodox believe, go see how they worship. Since worship is the focal point of Church life, we must take care that we are celebrating our services properly and in good order. There is nothing more difficult to endure than a worship service that drags on, in which celebrants and participants seem to be only "putting in time", and which completely "goes over the heads" of those present. When people look into a parish community, they will eventually - if not initially - come to a worship service. Often it is these services that present the extremely vital first impression of that community. For worship to be a "life-giving" experience, several things should be taken into account.**

**Understandable:** First and foremost, the service must be understandable to participants. Obviously, this involves language. A parish must consider the "target" of their outreach initiatives, and make the necessary changes to allow their worship to be accessible to these people. For most of our communities, this will mean adopting a bilingual format for their services.

Sometimes, the "language debate" becomes very polarised: it is looked upon as one way or another -- "a" or "z". In this debate, people tend to forget that between "a" and "z" there are 24 other options ("b" through "y"). A parish does not necessarily have to go "all English"; rather it can

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simply weave enough English through the service so that a visitor will not feel lost.

A second important part of making our services understandable is the explanation of the various symbolic articles and gestures. Our liturgy has a 2000-year history; many layers of symbolism have developed over that time. In all these layers, though, everything is there for a purpose. Explaining to people what we are doing and why will help show that our worship is very systematic and intentional. Nothing is superfluous — ritual for the sake of ritual.

Finally, services will be understandable if they are easy to "navigate"; this is particularly true for Vespers, Matins and special seasonal services. The faithful present should have booklets either with the full text of the service (and even music, if possible), or at least a general outline of the order. Such booklets should offer, not only the text, but also a brief explanation of the rite. If a service is celebrated infrequently e.g. the Great Blessing of Water on the Feast of Jordan, the priest should take a bit of time before the service to "introduce" people to the rite: what is going to happen, what are the major symbols or hymns, why is this important.

**Engaging /Participatory:** The Orthodox term for worship is "liturgy," from a Greek word meaning "the work of the people". The very term we use to denote our worship gives us an indication of how it is to be celebrated — as a "group effort".

*Our churches first and foremost are houses of prayer; prayer must be the essential activity in all parish life. Likewise, Christians are first and foremost called to be people of prayer; all else that we do flows out of this communion with God.*

A good way to keep worship as participatory as possible is to encourage congregational singing. If your services are led by a cantor, all the people should be encouraged to join him or her. If you have a choir, make sure that at least selected parts of the service are done by the whole congregation, such as responses ("Lord, have mercy", "And with your spirit.", etc.) and refrains (such as the Prokeimen, or the Alleluia after the Epistle reading).

For congregational participation in services, it is necessary to select music that is easy to follow. The two traditional Church chants (Kyivan and Galician/Halytsky) are both reverent, pleasant to hear and simple enough for everyone to sing. When choosing other arrangements for a choir, the same dignified but straightforward principle should be taken into consideration.

Beyond singing the hymns, it is necessary for people to be doing other things within the service as well. Lay liturgical ministries form an important component in the liturgical life of all worshippers. Men and boys should be encouraged to serve at the altar as *palamars* and acolytes. Women

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should be encouraged to serve in the parish sisterhood assisting with handing out candles and other activities. Men and women both should be encouraged to read the Epistle, the Hours or other prayers, and also to serve as Greeters. Having these opportunities to actively take part in worship is most important for the younger members of the congregation. Youth and young adults, if not encouraged to participate in the liturgical life of the community, will come to church always feeling like observers rather than participants.

**A Relevant Message:** All teaching (sermons, Church school, adult education, informal discussions, etc.) should focus on helping the people to “take the faith home”. The teaching that people receive in Church must help them to look at their world through Christian eyes.

**More than “Sunday only”:** One look at our Church calendar will show that holy days of feasting and fasting are woven throughout the year, making us anything but “Sunday only”. Among these services are:

- The Daily Cycle: Vespers & Matins (or combined as a Vigil)
- Feast Days & Services particular to Liturgical Seasons (Liturgy of Pre-sanctified Gifts, Great Blessing of

Water, the Kneeling Prayers of Pentecost, etc.)

- Services for specific needs (Moleben’, Panakhyda, Akathist)

These services give liturgical expression to every aspect of our lives. Likewise, prayer and worship must also be woven into all parish activities: study groups, meals, coffee hour, etc. This is one of the ways that we tangibly live out the invitation to “commend our whole life to Christ our God”.

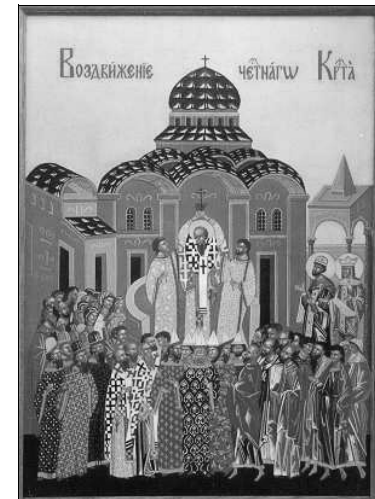
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**In all our expressions of prayer in parish life, formal (liturgical) and otherwise, we must see to it that we take the time and effort to make our worship as meaningful and edifying as possible. In times of persecution throughout the centuries, when the Church's ministry was limited exclusively to worship, it was this meaningful, liturgical expression of the Faith that kept Orthodoxy alive and well in the most adverse of situations. When approached with proper reverence and attention, our worship can also be a spring of life-giving water today.**

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## Success secrets of growing parishes

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