

Preparing Our Children for Holy Week Services & Pascha - A Guide for Teachers and Parents

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Introduction: The Services of Holy Week and Pascha are more than just remembrances of events. As in other worship services of the Orthodox Church, we are there “Today” to see the action unfold, to witness the fear, the injustice, the sadness, and the great joy. Help your students and children realize that we are not observers during Holy Week; we participate.

Order of the Orthros Service: 6 Psalms; Kathismata (sit while these hymns are sung); Troparia (Songs of the Day); Synaxarion (Who or What is remembered on this day); Hymns; Praises; Doxology; Litany; Apostica; “Holy God, Holy Mighty...”; Kontakion; Prayer; St. Ephraim’s Prayer; Dismissal.

PALM SUNDAY, HOLY MONDAY, HOLY TUESDAY - The Bridegroom Service

Orthros / Matins Service is sung in anticipation of the next morning. [Note: “At some point in history the times of the services began to change. The morning services were moved to the preceding evening and the evening services to the morning.” Although it is not clear when and why the changes occurred, it was common practice throughout the Orthodox Church by no later than the middle of the nineteenth century. *Great Week & Pascha in the Greek Orthodox Church, Alkiviadis C. Calivas, Holy Cross Press, 1999, p. 13.*

The theme for all 3 nights is Jesus’ Second Coming (the Parousia), at which time all things will be made new (Revelation 21:5). In this hymn taken from Scripture, Christ is the Bridegroom and each of us is the servant, and we are warned to be ready for Christ’s coming by preparing our souls. **The icon of Christ the Bridegroom (“Extreme Humility”)** is brought out in procession on Palm Sunday and used Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

Each night has a special theme.

Sunday – Joseph, son of Jacob, & the Withered Fig Tree

Monday - Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)

Tuesday - Sinful woman washes Jesus’ feet with myrrh (Hymn of Kassiani)

One of the two main Hymns of the Bridegroom service:

Behold the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night. Blessed is the servant He shall find watching; and unworthy is he, whom he shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, not be overcome by sleep, lest you be given up to death and shut out from the Kingdom. But raise yourself, cry out: “Holy, Holy, Holy are You, our God, through the intercession of the Heavenly Hosts save us.

For the Children: *Nearly everyone was there to greet Jesus when He came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. By the end of that week, even His disciples were hiding. Only his mother and the women disciples stood by Him.*

On Sunday evening, the icon of Christ in “Extreme Humility” is carried in procession from the Altar to the center of the Solea. We kneel because we see our God, our Creator hurt and suffering for us, for our salvation. We kneel to show our love for Him. We need to be at church to be there with Him during His last days on earth.

The students need to know these basic Bible stories: [1] Joseph is a prototype for Christ. His brothers sold him into slavery and later he forgives them and saves all of the family when there is famine in their homeland. [2] Believers need to be prepared for the second Coming of Christ like the five Wise Virgins. [3] Jesus forgives our many sins if we repent like the sinful woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair. Consider talking about the above hymn, putting it in your own

words.

HOLY WEDNESDAY

The Mystery (Sacrament) of Holy Unction is for the healing of both physical and spiritual illness, including the forgiveness of sins. It is based on James 5:14-15

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who committed sins will be forgiven.

The service contains seven Epistle and seven Gospel readings interspersed with seven Prayers of Repentance and Forgiveness. [The Sacrament is also celebrated any time someone is seriously ill.] Review some or all of the Epistle and Gospel readings with the children before coming to the Unction service.

Epistle Reading	Gospel Reading	Healing Saints
1. James 5:10-16	Luke 10:25-37	St. James, first Bishop of Jerusalem
2. Romans 15:1-7	Luke 19:1-10	St. Nicholas of Myra, St. Demetrios
3. 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:8	Matthew 10:1, 5-8	St. Panteleimon, St. John the Evangelist
4. 2 Corinthians 6:16-18, 7:1	Matthew 8:14-23	SS Cosmas & Damian, Theotokos
5. 2 Corinthians 1:8-11	Matthew 25: 1-13	SS Cyrus, John, Thaleleus, Tryphon,
6. Galatians 5:22-6:3	Matthew 15: 21-28	SS Panteleimon, Hermolaus, Samson
7. 2 Thessalonians 5:14-24	Matthew 9:9-13	SS Diomidis, Mokius, Aniketos

For the Children: *Jesus continues to heal people just as He did in the Gospels.* Suggest that they listen for the names of the "healing" saints that the priest will call upon during the service. Give them a longer list of saints that includes the healing saints. Ask the students to circle the healing saints names. If they can read, have them follow along in the service book and point out the names. Look to see if there are icons of these saints in your church. If so, ask the children to find the saints.

HOLY THURSDAY MORNING

The Vespertal Liturgy of Holy Thursday brings to memory the first Holy Communion that took place at the Mystical / Last Supper. (Mt 26:2-20; Jn 13:3-17; Mt 26:21-39; Lk 22:43-45; Mt 26:75 + 27:1-2)

For the Children: *The Gospel reading tells us about the first Holy Communion. It occurred after Jesus came into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. On the night before Passover began, according to St. John, Jesus gave bread and wine to His Disciples and told them to "do this in remembrance of me." Every time we receive Communion, it is as if we are at the Mystical/Last Supper with Jesus. The Greek word for remembrance means more than to remember. It includes to bring one back to that time.*

HOLY THURSDAY EVENING

The Passion of Christ and the Service of the Twelve Gospels is a solemn two and a half to three hour Orthros /Matins service. We hear the entire account of Jesus' last week - the agony and prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, His passion, betrayal by Judas, burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. The reading comes from all four gospels in order to include every detail, and then divided into twelve readings. Matthew 26:36-46; 27:3-54; 27:62-66, Mark 14:32-42; 15:16-32, Luke 22:39-46; 23:32-49, John 13:31-18:1, 19:25-37; 19:38-42.

After the fifth Gospel, we kneel as the priest carries Jesus hanging on the cross and cries out:

Today is hung upon the Tree, He who suspended the land in the midst of the waters.
[3x]

A crown of thorns crowns him, who is the King of angels. He is wrapped about with the

purple of mockery, who wrapped the heavens with clouds. He received buffetings, who freed Adam in the Jordan. He was transfixed with nails, the Bridegroom of the Church. He was pierced with a spear, the son of the Virgin. We worship Your Passion, O Christ. [3x] Show us also your glorious Resurrection.

This should be a time of great sadness for us. We, the creation, watch as our Creator dies for us.

For the Children: Too often parents do not bring the children because it is a lengthy service. A better option would be to come from the beginning, stay through the 5th Gospel, be there to kneel during the Procession with the Cross and venerate the Crucified Jesus, which usually occurs immediately afterwards, then take the children home. They have seen and participated in what is most important – seeing the Crucified Jesus and venerating Him. [Note: Consider sitting close to the front in order to leave earlier.]

Before coming to church, explain the two main events they can relate to: (1) The Mystical / Last Supper and (2) Judas' betrayal. Consider talking about the above hymn, putting it in your own words. If they can read, have them follow along in the Service Book.

HOLY FRIDAY AFTERNOON - The Apokathelosis / Unnailing Vesper Service

“Apokathelosis” literally means, “the unnailing” and refers to the unnailing and removal of Christ’s body from the Cross, which occurs at the afternoon service around 3:00 PM. The priest wraps the body in a white cloth and places it in the altar until the Feast of the Ascension. When the priest exits the Altar, he brings out the **Epitaphios** and places it in the decorated **Kouvouklion (Sepulcher / Tomb)**. The **Epitaphios** is an elaborate and beautifully decorated cloth icon depicting *Jesus’ body laid in the tomb*. Also in the icon, we see Joseph, Nicodemus, His mother the Theotokos, and others. (Sometimes, the Epitaphios only depicts Jesus’ body.) It may be painted or embroidered. The Apostica hymns (sung at a specific point in the Vesper service) describe the events of the day.

*With the help of Nicodemus, Joseph took You down from the tree,
You who wrap yourself in light as in a garment.
He saw you dead, stripped, and unburied,
and in his grief and compassion he bewailed you: ‘Ah my, most sweet Jesus!
When the sun just now saw You hanging on the cross, it wrapped itself in darkness.
The earth shook with fear and the curtain of the Temple was torn in two.*

NOTE: Holy Friday is the only day of the year when no Eucharistic liturgy is celebrated. Clergy are to wear their darkest color vestments, even black if they have them.

For the Children: *Great and Holy Friday is the most somber, sad quiet day of Holy Week. Today we are there with Joseph and Nicodemus, watching as they take Jesus down from the Cross and place Him in the tomb. By participating at this service, we too can experience the sorrow, the sadness over Jesus’ death on the cross. We will see a “tomb” beautifully adorned with flowers. We will see a very large icon of Christ near the tomb, the **Epitaphios**. We bow down before the Epitaphios/Christ then venerate / kiss Him or the Epitaphios to show how much we love Jesus and that we are sorry that He had to suffer.* Consider talking about the above hymn, putting it in your own words.

HOLY FRIDAY EVENING - Orthros Service of Lamentations (Encomia)

Sung in anticipation of Saturday morning

Theme: Christ’s burial and His descent into Hades Friday evening. “We gather with both sorrow and joy to sing the Lamentations (Encomia) to him who is symbolically buried in the Epitaphios [kouvouklion] and yet whom we perceive by faith to be immortal life.” (Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos, **A Year of the Lord: Liturgical Bible Studies**, vol. 3 Triodion & Lent.)

The service contains hymns of lamentation and sorrow for both Christ's death and our own sins. In the 9th Ode the hymnographer - Kassiani the Melodist - gives Jesus a voice as He tries to comfort His mother:

Lament not for Me, Mother, as you behold Me in the grave, Whom as a Son you conceived in your womb without seed. For I shall rise and be glorified, and as God, I shall ceaselessly exalt in glory those, who in faith and yearning, magnify you.

For the Children: Talk to them about what to expect. (1) A longer service than in the afternoon.

(2) The singing of the Lamentations. (Note: *Our youth need to have memories of participating in these services. If we truly desire to keep our children in the Orthodox faith, they, along with the entire congregation, need to sing the lamentations in English as well as Greek. Everyone needs to know what the hymns are teaching.*)

(3) A Procession around the church with the Sepulcher led by the priest, altar servers, choir and all the people holding candles.

(4) The Readings:

- ✘ Prophecy of Ezekiel 37: 1-14 about the dry bones. Help them to begin to connect the services and Bible readings and the hymns.
- ✘ Epistle Readings: 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 about the power of a little "Leaven" and Galatians 3:13-14 about the Old Testament "curse on anyone who hangs on a tree (cross)."
- ✘ Gospel Reading: Matthew 27:62-66 about the Jewish officials wanting Pilate to place a guard at the Tomb.

(5) Consider talking about the above hymn, putting it in your own words. It shows how much Jesus loved His mother that He wanted to prepare her for what was to happen.

HOLY SATURDAY MORNING - Vespertine Liturgy of the First Resurrection. St. Basil's Liturgy anticipates Christ's Resurrection. One of the hymns of Vespers claims:

Today Hades cried out groaning: Would that I had not received Him Who was born of Mary, for He came to me and broke my power; He shattered the gates of brass, and as God raised up the souls which before I had held. Glory O Lord to Your Cross and Your Resurrection.

An unusual event occurs after the Epistle reading. The priest walks throughout the Church tossing bay leaves (or other greenery or flower petals) and chants joyfully. [Historically, bay leaves were tossed in the pathway of conquering heroes. For us, Jesus is our hero who conquers death.]

Our Holy Week books usually contain a few of the 15 Old Testament prophecies that can be read at this service, including the entire book of Jonah. Jonah's life symbolizes death and resurrection. [It is my understanding that historically, the prophecies (15 in all) were read to keep the faithful prayerful while catechumens were baptized. The more baptisms, the more prophecies were read. Holy Saturday morning was a special day because the newly-illuminated Christians would receive the Eucharist at Pascha.]

In Daniel we find the three youths in the fiery furnace: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Azarias). The reading includes the "Song of the Three Youths," which has this refrain: "*Praise ye the Lord and exalt Him forever,*" which the children could sing.

For the Children: If the children are too young to come at night or it just is not practical to do so, then bring them to this service. Explain that this is the time Jesus is in Hades freeing all the Righteous people waiting to be set free. (They are in the icon.) The children will remember the tossing of the bay leaves. If possible, have the children sing the refrain of the "Song of the Three Youths." The melody is easy and for a moment in time, they can be the three youths in the furnace. If you do not come, read the stories to them together at home. Recite as if

chanting the *Hymn of the Three Youths*.

HOLY SATURDAY EVENING - Matins and Paschal Liturgy

"As by a man came death, by a man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:21-22).

For the Children: *When we come to Church late Saturday evening, the Church is very quiet and somewhat dark. Just before midnight, all the lights are off. The only light comes from some flickering candles.*

At midnight the priest comes forward with a lit candle and proclaims, "Come, receive the light from the unwaning light, and glorify Christ, Who has risen from the dead."

The priest reads the Gospel at the Church entrance, or in the middle of the Church, under the lit candles held by the faithful. We hear the angel tell Mary Magdalene and the other women, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified? He is risen! He is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter," (Mark 16:6-7). Then the priest and faithful burst out with: "CHRIST IS RISEN! TRULY HE IS RISEN!" followed by the full hymn: "Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life." (Replace this "Christ is Risen" hymn with the translation your parish uses.)

The priest's white vestments seem to glow! The tomb of Jesus is gone/put aside. The Cross is empty. We sing loudly and with great excitement many times: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life." This is the happiest service of the year and we are glad to be part of it!

AGAPE VESPERS - The Resurrection Vesper Service

The Gospel (John 20:19-25) is read in different languages to emphasize the universality of the eternal Gospel of Christ. It relates Jesus' appearance to the confused and frightened disciples. Jesus appears to them even though they were in a room with locked doors.

For the Children: If they have studied a language at school and can read this section of the Gospel, inform your priest. *To show that Christianity is for all people, the Gospel will be read in as many languages as there are people who can read it.* (At Pascha Polyglotta - <http://www.srbigham.com/en/index.html> - you can hear "Christ is Risen" in 250 languages including Klingon!)

Talk about the surprise that is in store for the Disciples in today's Gospel reading and how much we would be surprised if we were there. After the service, ask them why everyone was surprised. If you do not attend, read the Gospel in as simple language as you can. Then ask the same question. Depending on the age of your children, consider talking about the following: *When we die and go to heaven our souls with join our bodies again, but the bodies will be different, just like Jesus' body was different.*

Resources: *Holy Week – Easter* Service Book compiled by Fr. George Papadeas; *The Lenten Forum*, Fr. Alexander Veronis, Annunciation Church, Lancaster, PA, 4/2/2003; *A Dictionary of Greek Orthodoxy* by Fr. Nikon Patrinos.

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