



THE HOLY MYSTERIES

**THE HOLY MYSTERIES
(Sacraments)**

St. John Chrysostom on Mystery

“It is called mystery, because what we believe is not the same as what we see, since one thing we see but another, we believe. For such is the nature of our Mysteries... On hearing of a Baptism the unbeliever counts it merely as water; but I behold not simply the thing seen, but the purification of soul by the Holy Spirit.” Cf. 7 Homily on 1 Cor., 2)

In order to carry on His work of redemption “until the end of the world” (Mt. 28:20), our Lord Jesus Christ established the Church, investing it with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33) and all the necessary means of salvation. The most important of those means of salvation are the Sacraments.

Sacrament means something holy, something sacred. In our case it means a sacred rite which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, confers divine grace, i.e. a redeeming power of God on man’s soul. Since the work of the Holy Spirit in man’s soul remains a hidden reality covered with a mystery (Greek: *mysterion*, secret, we in the Byzantine tradition properly call the Sacraments the Holy Mysteries.

St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) explains: “It is called mystery, because what we believe is not the same as what we see; one thing we see and another we believe. For such is the nature of mysteries.” (Homily on / Cor. 7:2).

1.

In creating man, God made him to His “image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26) and endowed him with the gift of divine life. After a trial on earth, man was then destined to eternal life with God in heaven. However, through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, man lost the gift of divine life in his soul and thus heaven became closed to him. Instead, man inherited suffering and sorrow, while sin took domination of his soul, leading him to the “eternal judgement”. (Hebr. 6:2).

In His infinitive love and mercy, God decided to save man. He therefore gave “His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:16). By his sufferings and death Jesus has taken away the “sins of the world” (Jn. 1:29) and obtained salvation for all. Therefore, having been “justified” by the grace of Christ, once more we become “heirs in hope of eternal life.” (Tit 3:7).

2.

Jesus Christ came on earth that we “might have (divine) life and have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). To initiate and to sustain this divine life in our soul He established the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments), which thus become the most important means of our salvation. The seven mysteries satisfy all of the fundamental needs of our spiritual life to which we are born through baptism “of water and the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 3:5). St. Paul describes the Mystery of Baptism as a “cleansing water of rebirth and renewal (of divine life) by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5).

The simple birth, however, is not enough to stay alive. We must grow and become strong so that we can overcome all of the obstacles to our spiritual advancement. For this reason, through the Mystery of Chrismation (Confirmation), Jesus strengthens us with the “power from on high” (Luke 24:49), i.e., with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Divine life of grace, given to us by baptism, is then sustained and nourished by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, provided for us in the Holy Eucharist. Holy Communion thus becomes a token of the “eternal life” for us (Jn. 6:54).

These three mysteries are usually referred to as the Mysteries of Initiation, since through them divine life is restored to us and we become closely united with Jesus Christ, making us members of His Mystical Body, the Church (Col. 1:18). Through them we become initiated into the Church. Consequently, from the very beginning of Christianity, these three mysteries were administered to the converts at the same time.

3.

During our earthly pilgrimage we remain exposed to temptations and frequently we become overwhelmed by sin, causing our spiritual sickness. As a remedy against sin and eventual spiritual death (loss of the divine life of grace) our Lord provided us with the Mystery of Repentance, by which our sins are forgiven and our spiritual health is restored.

In the instances of serious physical sickness, the Church is ready to comfort us with the Mystery of Anointing, by which our sufferings become united with those of Christ “in hope of life eternal” (Tit 1:2). The Holy Anointing cleanses our soul from sin and often restores even our bodily health, as explained by St. James: “The prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, they will be forgiven” (James 5:15).

So that the kingdom of God may expand, our Lord elevated the nuptial union of a Christian couple to the dignity of the Holy Mystery of Marriage, thus endowing them with grace to foster their mutual love (Eph. 5:32-33) and to secure a Christian education of their children (1 Cor 7:14).

The Church carries on Christ’s work of salvation through its ministers, invested by the power of the Holy Spirit, given to them by the imposition of the bishops’ hands. Thus, the Mystery of the Holy Orders provides the Church with the authentic “ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1), leading the people of God toward salvation.

These seven Holy Mysteries (Sacraments), as instituted by Jesus Christ, were in use since apostolic times. A documentary evidence of their dispensation is given to us by the Holy Scriptures, Supported by the writings of the Church Fathers.

4.

The early Christians did not speculate about the Holy Mysteries. Instead, they availed themselves of their “marvelous power” (St. John Chrysostom) and tried to live by them as redeemed children of God (Col. 1:10). They also were not concerned about a precise number of Holy Mysteries.

The primary concern of the Fathers was to instruct the candidates and to prepare them to receive the Holy Mysteries with as much spiritual benefit as possible. In an effort to satisfy the actual needs of the converts, they concentrated on the Mysteries of Initiation (Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist) and Holy Orders. The other mysteries were treated by the Fathers only incidentally, without much elaboration.

During the patristic period the dispensation of all seven Holy Mysteries was unanimous, and nobody tried to deny their validity. The Fathers, strictly adhering to the “discipline of secrecy”, limited their treatment to only the devotional and ascetical meaning of the mysteries, without any systematic presentation of sacramental doctrine as a whole.

The “discipline of secrecy,” not to divulge the teaching of the Church concerning the Holy Mysteries, was based on the ban of Christ: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine” (Mt. 7:6). Therefore St. Basil (d. 379) explains: “The Apostles and Fathers, who laid down the laws of the Church, from the beginning guarded the awful dignity of the Mysteries in secrecy and silence (cf. *On the Holy Spirit*, 27).

5.

Although the number of Holy Mysteries was fixed at seven since the seventh century, we must nevertheless wait until the time of Scholasticism in the West (the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) to give us a systematic presentation of the doctrine on the Holy Mysteries, known as Sacramental Theology. By the fourteenth century the Scholastic presentation, with some minor adaptations, was also accepted by the Byzantine Church.

It was the authority of Archbishop Simeon of Thessalonica (d. 1429) that finally fixed Byzantine theology on the Holy Mysteries in full harmony with the West (cf. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 155). Consequently, at the Council of Florence (1439) there was a complete agreement between the Byzantine and Roman Churches regarding the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). There may be some individual exceptions among the theologians, but the official position of the Byzantine Church remains unchanged to the present time.

When Cyril Lukaris, who became Patriarch of Constantinople by his personal intrigue, tried to introduce a Protestant teaching - that of admitting only two sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist) - he was promptly condemned by the Synod of Constantinople in 1638. The Synod of Jassy in 1642 then adopted the Orthodox Confession of Metropolitan Peter Mohyla of Kiev, containing the traditional teaching on the seven Holy Mysteries. The following year Mohyla's Orthodox Confession was endorsed by the Synod of Constantinople, and eventually was accepted by all of the Eastern Churches. Thus, the traditional teaching of the Byzantine Church regarding the Holy Mysteries remains preserved to the present time.

6.

The authentic Byzantine tradition, then, teaches that our Lord provided His Church with seven chief means of salvation - the Holy Mysteries. The Mysteries (Sacraments) are not only the channels of divine grace, but they also are perceptible signs (symbols) of the invisible grace of God, which they confer through the performance of the sacred rites. St. John Chrysostom therefore describes the Holy Mysteries as “the symbols of our salvation perceivable through faith” (cf. 86 Homily on John, 4).

Throughout the centuries there were various attempts to give us a general definition of the Holy Mysteries. St. Augustine’s definition became a classic one since the fifth century: A Sacrament (Holy Mystery) is a visible sign of an invisible grace instituted by Christ, It remained in general use both in the West as well as in the East. The later theologians added only the purpose of the institution, namely: “for sanctification” or “for the salvation of man.”

The redeeming power of God (grace) and the working of the Holy Spirit in our soul are invisible and imperceptible to us. Jesus Christ therefore decided to confer His saving grace in a visible manner, through outward symbols or signs, the holy ritual, by which divine grace is implied and conferred. Thus, enlightened by our faith, we become certain of receiving divine grace through the invisible working of the Holy Spirit in our soul.

Since the redeeming grace was merited and comes to us through our Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:17), only Jesus had the power and authority to establish the Holy Mysteries as the primary means of our salvation. In our future leaflets, when discussing the individual mysteries, we will point out how and when our Lord had in fact instituted each mystery.

During the centuries which followed the Church formed and elaborated a proper liturgical ritual for the administration of the Holy Mysteries, to make them more solemn and more meaningful to the faithful. However, it was Jesus Christ, and He alone, who instituted the seven Holy Mysteries, just as He instituted the Church to carry on His work of salvation.

Byzantine Leaflet Series

No. 47

With Ecclesiastical Approbation March 1989

Byzantine Seminary Press

Pittsburgh, PA 15214

THE HOLY MYSTERY OF PENANCE (Confession)

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ commissioned His Church to preach “the repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations” (Lk. 24:47) in His name. Since He does not “wish that anyone should be lost, but that all be brought to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9), our Lord endowed the Church with the power to forgive sins by instituting the Holy Mystery of Penance, simply known as - Confession.

The Holy Mystery of Penance is the mystery instituted by Jesus Christ to forgive, in His name, the repentant sinner all his or her sins committed after baptism.

1.

Sin is disobedience of God’s will, therefore it is a direct offense against God. Hence, only God can forgive sin. But Almighty God, “generous in His more fist 2 save is people from their so., (Mt. 1:21) And Jesus Christ came into this world “not to condemn but to save the world,” (Jn. 3:17) therefore He called all the people “to repentance” “Mt. 4:17) and to those who came to Him He “forgave their sins.” (Lk. 7:49)

In answer to the Pharisees, who questioned His power to forgive sins, our Lord even healed a paralytic man, saying: “That you may know that the Son of Man has the power to forgive sins on earth, — He said to the paralytic: - I say to you, pick up your mat and go home!” And the Evangelist assures us that the paralyzed man arose at once, picked up his mat and went home, while the people remained astonished, since they “have never seen anything like that.” (2:10-12)

Therefore, anyone who does not believe that Jesus Christ, as the Savior of the world, had the power to forgive sins, cannot be a true Christian, since he does not believe in the mission of the Son of God “to save the people from their sins.

2.

The authority “to forgive sins on earth” (Mk. 2:10) Jesus Christ passed on to His apostles and their duly ordained successors, charging them to continue His salvific work until the “end of the world.” (Mt. 28:20) First our Lord only promised to invest the Apostles with the power to forgive sins, saying: “Whatever you shall bind on earth it shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth it shall be loosed in heaven.” (Mt. 18:18).

In the evening of His glorious resurrection our Lord entrusted the Apostles with His own mission, saying: “As the Father has sent me, so also I sent you!” And then, after breathing on them, He said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.” (Jn. 20:21-23) With these words our Lord instituted the Holy Mystery of Penance (Sacrament of Confession) and commissioned the apostles, and their duly appointed successors, the bishops and the priests, to forgive or to retain sins “in His name” (Acts 10:43), as testified by St. Paul: “God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ, has given us the ministry of reconciliation “ (2 Cor. 5:18).

St. Ambrose of Milan (+397) voices the unanimous teaching of the Church Fathers, when he says: “We are commanded by our Lord to confer the grace of the heavenly sacrament to those guilty even of the greatest sins, if they with a sincere confession bear the penance due to their sins.” (cf. *On Repentance*, II, 3)

It is true that “only God can forgive sins” (Mk. 2:7), but in virtue of Christ’s commission, what God does through His duly ordained minister (confessor), He does it by his own authority. St. John Chrysostom explains: “What priests do on earth, God ratifies in heaven. The Master confirms the decision of His servants (priests). Indeed, He has given them nothing less than the full authority of heaven.” (cf. *On the Priesthood*, III, 5).

3.

The practice of penance and forgiveness of sins was a constant belief in the Church, according to the words of St. John the Evangelist: we confess (in Greek: *homologein* - to acknowledge, to declare openly) our sins, God is faithful and will forgive them, and will cleanse us from every iniquity.” (1 Jn. 1:9)

Already at the end of the first century the *Didachè* (about 96 A.D.) admonishes the sinners: “Confess your sins in church and do not go to (Eucharistic) prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life” (ch. 14). A similar order is given in the so called *Epistle of Barnabas*, written before 132 A.D.: “Make confession for your sins; and you shall not go to prayer (in church) with a bad conscience” (ch. 19, 12). And St. Polycarp of Smyrna (+ 156), admonishing the confessors, says: “Be compassionate and merciful toward those that strayed..., knowing that we all are under the debt of sin and need forgiveness.” (cf. *Epistle to Philippi*, 6)

The administration of confession in the Church is clearly testified to by St. Cyprian (+ 258), insisting: “Let everyone confess his sins while he is still in this world, while his confession can still be heard, while the forgiveness of his sins granted to him by a priest is still acceptable to God.” (cf. *On the Lapsed*, 29).

From these and many other testimonies we can clearly see that the Church not only preached “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Lk. 24:47), but also practiced what she preached by the administration of the Holy Mystery of Penance, according to the words of St. Ambrose: “If you want to be justified, confess your sins!” (cf. *On Repentance*, II, 6).

4.

Instituting the Mystery of Penance, our Lord left the responsibility of whether to forgive or to retain the sins with the confessor.

Such a decision requires the acknowledgement (confession) of the sins by the penitent, since the confessor is not able to read the secrets of the human heart. A humble confession of sins is also required on the part of the penitent in order to manifest his sorrow for his sins (contrition of heart) and a firm resolution to “sin no more” (Jn. 8:11). The confession of sins is so important that the Mystery of Penance is simply called - Confession.

The ritual of the Mystery of Penance, just as that of the other sacraments, has undergone a long process of development. In the first centuries there were two kinds of penance: public and private (cf. St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1, 13). Public confession was made openly before the entire congregation, and was required in the case of public sins, especially those of homicide, adultery and apostasy. With time the number of public sins kept increasing. Private or so called “hidden” sins were confessed privately to the bishop or priest alone.

Public confession began to decline during the fourth century. Already St. Basil the Great (+379) stated: “The confession of sins should be made before those that are able to heal them,” meaning before the priests (cf. *The Short Rules*, 229). But it was Archbishop Nectarius of Constantinople (+ 397) who cancelled public confession, although in some places the practice continued, but only on a voluntary basis. In the West, public confession was abolished by Pope St. Leo the Great (+461), who decreed that it was sufficient to manifest one’s sins, even public ones, by a “secret confession to the priest alone” (cf. *Epistle* 168, 2).

5.

The Mystery of Penance or Confession is the ordinary way to obtain the remission of sins committed after baptism. On the part of the penitent it requires: a) a sincere and complete confession of sins, b) a heartfelt sorrow for sins committed, sealed by a firm resolution not to sin anymore, and c) readiness to make satisfaction for committed sins according to the disposition of Zacchaeus, the tax collector: “Lord, half of my possessions I shall give to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone I will pay him back four times the amount” (Lk. 19:8).

To be able to confess all our sins sincerely, first we must “come to our senses,” as the Prodigal in the gospel did (Lk. 15:17), and sincerely admit that we have indeed offended our loving and merciful God. Only then we will be able to conceive in our heart a sincere sorrow for all our sins, leading us to a true repentance and amendment of our life. This can be achieved only through a good examination of conscience before going to confession.

The essential part of repentance is the sorrow for our sins, since without a sincere regret for having offended our loving God and a decisive rejection of the sins committed, no forgiveness or absolution will be given. Hence the Prophet tells us: “Cast away all the sins you have committed and make a new heart for yourself” (Ez. 18:31). And according to the teaching of St. Paul only sincere contrition of our heart, called by him “a godly sorrow,” will assure for us a true “repentance that leads to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10). Even David was convinced that a “contrite and humble heart God will not spurn.” (Ps. 51:19)

6.

On his return the Prodigal Son humbly confessed: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I no longer deserve to be called your son!” And the father? He not only received his son back with joy, but also ordered his servants “to bring and to put on him the finest robe, to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet” (Lk. 15:20-22). In other words, he restored to him all the privileges of a son.

In the same manner our Heavenly Father receives with joy every repentant sinner when he comes back to Him and sincerely admits his wrongdoings. God also restores to the repentant sinner all the privileges of a son. Through the sacramental absolution of the confessor, God again clothes the penitent’s soul with the “finest robe” of sanctifying grace, restoring to him, or to her, divine life lost by “deadly sin” (1 Jn. 5:16); makes the penitent soul “free from the slavery of sin” (Jn. 8:36), symbolized in the parable by sandals, since in those days the slaves went barefooted.

And by “putting a ring on his finger” our Lord indicated the restoration of the Prodigal to all of his inheritance rights -in our case life everlasting with our Father in heaven. And let me conclude with the authoritative words of the fourth century work, the Apostolic Constitutions, reassuring us: “God not only receives back the penitent sinners, but restores them back to their former dignity of God’s child-ren” (Book II, ch. 41).

ST. ATHANASIUS (+ 373) ON PENANCE “As the man whom the priest baptizes is enlightened by the Holy Spirit, so does he who in penance confesses his sins, receives through the ministry of the priest, forgiveness of sins in virtue of the grace of Christ.” -Fragment Against

Byzantine Leaflet Series

No. 47

With Ecclesiastical Approbation March 1989

Byzantine Seminary Press

Pittsburgh, PA 15214

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

The Mystery of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ

Through baptism we are regenerated to the divine life of grace and become the children of God. Through chrismation we mystically participate in the descent of the holy Spirit, who seals (confirms) us in the divine life of God's children and enriches us with His abundant gifts. However, it is through the Holy Eucharist that we become intimately united to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who becomes our spiritual nourishment, leading us into life everlasting.

In Greek, the word - eucharist means thanksgiving, since at the Last Supper, before changing bread and wine into His Body and Blood, our Lord "gave thanks" (Mt. 26:27). Therefore the central part of the Holy Liturgy is the Prayer of Thanksgiving (in Greek - Eucharistia), in which the celebrant thanks Almighty God for all His benefits, especially for the gift of redemption. In the biblical sense, then, thanksgiving (eucharist) is blessing God for His manifold gifts bestowed on us.

1.

The Apostles first called the celebration of the Holy Eucharist the Breaking of Bread (Acts 2:42), since at the Last Supper Jesus "took bread and, after He had given thanks, broke it and said: - This is my body!" (1 Cor. 11:23-24). And it was "at the breaking of bread" that Jesus was recognized by His two disciples in Emmaus (Lk. 24:30-31). Thus, in apostolic times, the Breaking of Bread became a technical term to indicate the celebration of the Holy Liturgy.

It was also called the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:20), since the celebration of the Holy Eucharist was considered a liturgical repetition of the Last Supper, the time Our Lord ordered His disciples to: "Do this in commemoration of me!" (Lk. 22:19). St. John Chrysostom (+407) explains that St. Paul by the expression, "The Lord's Supper" was referring to "that evening on which Christ delivered the awesome Mysteries" (cf. Homilies on 1 Cor., XXVII, 4).

At the end of the first century a new term you come together, break bread and offer the Eucharist, having first confessed your sins, so that your sacrifice may be pure" (ch. 14). By the end of the second century the term - Holy Eucharist prevailed.

2.

The Holy Eucharist can be considered as a sacrifice of the New Testament, as well as a mystery (sacrament) of the Body and Blood of our Lord. Since the sacrificial aspect of the Holy Eucharist was already discussed in one of our previous leaflets (cf. Byzantine Leaflet Series, No. 20), in this leaflet we will treat the Holy Eucharist as one of the seven Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) in the tradition of the Byzantine Rite.

The Eucharist is the Holy Mystery of the New Testament instituted by Jesus Christ, in which under the species of consecrated bread and wine we receive the Body and the Blood of our Lord as our spiritual food.

The Holy Eucharist is indeed a mystery (in Greek - *mysterion* means a secret, a hidden thing to the human eye), since in it, to use the words of St. John Chrysostom, “What we believe is not the same as what we see. One thing we see (bread and wine), and another we believe (Body and Blood of our Lord). And such is the nature of our Mysteries” (cf. Hom. on 1 Cor. VII, 2).

And it is a unique mystery, since by Holy Communion we receive not only the increase of saving grace, by the very Author of grace, our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we become intimately united with our Savior, who assured us: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him!” ((.6:56). Hence the reception of the Holy Eucharist is called - Holy Communion (from Latin – *cum + unio*, united with), meaning united with the Holy One.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (+ 386) confirms: “By partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ we become one body and blood with Christ, we become - Christ-bearers (in Greek: *Christophers*). In this way, according to blessed Peter (2 Pet. 1:4), we ‘share in the divine nature’ “ (cf. Catechetical Lectures, XX, 3).

3.

The Holy Eucharist was instituted by our Lord at the Last Supper, which was celebrated in the atmosphere of tender love, as testified by St. John: “Jesus, knowing that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, He loved His own in the world, He loved them to the end” (Jn. 13:1). Prompted then by His infinite love, our Lord took a loaf of bread in His hands and, after giving thanks, He broke it and gave it to the Apostles, saying: “Take and eat, this is my body, which will be given (broken) for you.” (Lk. 22:19) Then He took the chalice with wine, gave thanks, blessed it and, giving it to the Apostles, said: “Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the New Testament, which will be shed for many for the remission of sins” (Mt. 26:27-28).

After the Apostles received their First Holy Communion, our Lord commissioned them to perpetuate this Mystical Supper, saying: “Do this in commemoration of me!” (Lk. 22:19). St. John Chrysostom explains: “Therefore, the offering is the same which Christ gave to His disciples, and which now the priests minister. For as the words which Christ had spoken are the same which the priest now pronounces, so also the offering is the same” (cf. Hom. on 2 Tim., II, 4).

This is my body- This is my blood, these are simple words, but they are the words of Almighty God, who by His word created heaven and earth: “He spoke and they were made, He commanded and they stood forth” (Ps. 33:9). St. Gregory of Nyssa (+ 394) does not hesitate to affirm: “We rightly believe that the bread which is consecrated by the word of God (Jesus) is changed into the body of God the Word,” meaning Jesus (cf. Catechetical Oration, 37).

A similar explanation is also given by St. John Damascene (+749): “If heaven and earth, and the whole universe were established by the word of God, then can He not make the bread His body and the wine His blood? The Word of God (Jesus) said: ‘This is my body’ - ‘This is my blood,’ and then: ‘Do this in commemoration of me!’ Thus by His almighty command it is done” (cf. On the Orthodox Faith, IV, 13).

4.

In Holy Scripture we read that when the Prophet Elijah was persecuted by the impious Queen Jezebel, he fled into the desert, and hid. After some time on the run, Elijah became very dejected and, at the end of his strength, he asked God to take his life. Then he fell to the ground and soon was fast asleep. But before long an angel of the Lord awakened him, and, offering him a loaf of bread and a jug of water, he encouraged him: “Get up and eat, for you have a long way to go!” So the Prophet got up and ate. Being refreshed he then walked forty days and nights, until he came to the holy mountain Horeb, where he had a vision of God (1 Kgs. 19:1-18).

Along the road of our life, we too, being persecuted by the enemy of our salvation, often become weary and dejected and at the end of our spiritual strength. Then our Lord, through his messenger (Greek - angelos), the celebrating priest, at the Divine Liturgy invites us: “Take and eat, this is my body!”, and again: “Drink of this, this is my blood!” And after Holy Communion, being refreshed by this “bread from heaven” (Jn. 6:32) and “the cup of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27), we are ready to continue our pilgrimage toward the holy mountain, to meet God, our Father in heaven.

In the Holy Eucharist, then, Jesus gives us His own body and blood as spiritual food in order to nurture and sustain divine life of grace in us. And He himself assures us: “Just as have life because of my Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have (spiritual) life because of me” (Jn. 6:57). Therefore, St. Ignatius of Antioch (+ 110) calls the Holy Eucharist - “the medicine of immortality, and antidote to ensure that we shall not die but live in Jesus forever” (cf. Epistle to Ephesians, 20).

5.

Our Lord did not give any specific instruction concerning the frequency of the reception of Holy Communion, but He warned us: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will have no life in you!” (Jn. 6:53). In other words, in order to sustain our divine life of grace, we must “feed our soul” by receiving Holy Communion regularly, as long as we live. Otherwise we run the danger of losing our soul.

From the very beginning, the Fathers of the Church insisted that the faithful receive Holy Communion as often as possible, even daily. Thus, e.g. St. Basil the Great (+379) says: “To receive Holy Communion daily and thus partake of the holy body and blood of Christ, is an excellent and most beneficial practice, since Christ distinctly said: ‘He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life everlasting’ (Jn. 6:54). And who can doubt that to share continually in the life (of Christ) is nothing else than to enjoy a full divine life?” (cf. Epistle 93).

The practice of frequent, even daily Holy Communion in the Church lasted until the Middle Ages, when the fervor of Christian life began to decline considerably. Consequently, the faithful were warned not to approach the holy altar carelessly, in the Holy Scriptures as a “sin unto death” (1 Jn. 5:16), without first going to confession. Otherwise they would commit a serious offense (sacrilege) against the “body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27), by receiving the Holy Eucharist “unworthily,” as warned already by St. Paul, saying: “Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, eats and drinks for his own condemnation” (1 Cor. 11:27-28).

6.

The faithful, instead of going to confession in order to be ready for Holy Communion, began to abstain from the “spiritual food.” To correct this deplorable practice the Church Fathers established four fasting seasons, before Christmas, Easter, the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, and the Dormition of the Blessed Mother, in order that the people properly prepare themselves by going to confession, thus being properly disposed to receive Holy Communion at least on those solemn feastdays.

As the moral life of the faithful steadily continued to decline and Holy Communion became more and more neglected, the Church was finally forced to impose a special precept, binding the faithful, under pain of mortal sin, to go to confession and receive Holy Communion at least once a year during the Easter Season. Otherwise, the faithful would expose themselves to the danger of not attaining their salvation since, according to the words of Christ, “unless we eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, we will have no life (of grace) in us” (Jn. 6:53). Therefore the precept of the Easter duty should be taken very seriously.

The Easter Season which the faithful are able to fulfill their Easter duty extends from the first day of the Great Fast (Lent) until the Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday of All Saints, so that there would be no excuse to receive the Eucharist at least once a year. But we should keep in mind that, in the light of the teachings of Jesus Christ, it is not enough to receive Holy Communion only once a year. In order to “have the life (of grace) and have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10), we must nourish our soul with the “bread from heaven” (Jn. 6:32) constantly, even daily if possible.

Let us then approach the Holy Table “with fear of God and with Faith” (Liturgy)!
On the Cover: Emmaus - Christ is recognized at the Breaking of Bread (Lk. 24:31).

Byzantine Leaflet Series

No. 47

With Ecclesiastical Approbation March 1989

Byzantine Seminary Press

Pittsburgh, PA 15214

THE HOLY MYSTERY OF BAPTISM

(Christening)

The Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) are the most important means of our salvation, which were established and entrusted to the Church by Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There are seven such sacramental mysteries administered by the Byzantine Rite Church (cf. Byzantine Leaflet Series, 1989, No. 47), the first being the Holy Mystery of Baptism, by which we become regenerated into the divine life of God's children in Jesus Christ and become living members of His Church.

The term - baptism is a Greek term and literally means bathing or washing, as suggested by St. Paul: "He (Jesus) saved us by means of the cleansing water (bath) of regeneration, renewing us by the Holy Spirit." (Tit. 3:5) St. John Chrysostom (a. 407) remarks: "This mystical cleansing (baptism) is also called the bath of regeneration." (cf. Chrysostom's Baptismal Instructions, X, 12).

Baptism is also called - Christening, since it makes us Christians, the followers of Christ Acts 11:26), for "all who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ." (Gal. 3:27) Being mystically united by Baptism to Christ, we do not belong anymore to ourselves, we "belong to Christ." 2 Cor. 10:7)

1.

Before His Ascension Our Lord commissioned His disciples, and through them His Church, to teach all nations and make all of them Christians, saying: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" Mt. 28:19-20, and only those "who will believe and be baptized will be saved." (Mk. 16:16)

The institution of Baptism comes directly from Our Lord Jesus Christ, who at the beginning of His public ministry solemnly proclaimed: "Amen, amen I say to you, unless a man is born again (regenerated) of water and (Holy) Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (Jn. 3:5) The Church then recognizes Baptism as a new birth by the Holy Spirit, which marks the beginning of our divine life in Christ Jesus, as testified by St. Irenaeus (d. 202): "Baptism is the seal of eternal life and our rebirth in the Spirit of God, so that we become not only the children of men but also the children of the Eternal God." (cf. his Apostolic Demonstrations, Excerpts).

2.

When, on the day of Pentecost, the Jews were asking Peter what they must do to be saved, he answered: “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (i. e. by the Baptism instituted by Jesus Christ-Acts -Acts for forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (through Confirmation). Scripture assures us that those who accepted Peter’s advice “were baptized, about three thousand of them.” (Acts 2:37-38, 41) The apostles and their successors did not fail to baptize all those who believed in Jesus Christ and promised to abide by His teachings. Thus they were initiated into Christian community, as witnessed by the second century martyr, St. Justin (d. 156): “Those who believe in the truth of our teachings and undertake to live accordingly.... are led by us to a place where there is water to be regenerated (baptized) in the same way as we were - in the name of God the Father, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.” (cf. his First Apology, 61).

3.

Initially the baptismal ritual was very simple as described to us by the first century document, *The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, generally known by its Greek title - *Didachè* (teaching), written about 90 A.D.:

“Concerning Baptism - baptize in running water. But if you do not have running water, use whatever is available. Pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (cf. *Didachè*,7).

But with time, as the liturgical life of the Church was developing, the administration of Holy Baptism became more and more elaborate, being constantly enriched by highly impressive and symbolic ceremonies in imitation of the pomp and splendor of the Imperial Court. After all, the Church did indeed represent God's kingdom on earth.

By the middle of the fourth century the baptismal ritual in the Byzantine Church reached its full development as testified by the *Catechetical Lectures* of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, which he delivered during the Lent of 348 A.D. in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Another authority on the development of the baptismal ritual is St. John Chrysostom who delivered his *Baptismal Instructions* in Antioch, between 388-390 A.D.

4.

In these patristic instructions we can clearly trace all the integral parts of the present baptismal initiation, namely: 1) Reception of the candidate for baptism (catechumenate), who had to be presented by a sponsor; 2) exorcism - since in consequence of original sin the candidates were subject to a certain degree to the hostile power of the evil spirit (cf. Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, , 12-14); 3) renunciation of the devil and adherence to Christ, referred to by Chrysostom as the “contract of faith” (Ibid., XI, 19-26); 4) profession of faith, called by St. Cyril the “saving confession” (cf. *Catech. Lectures*, XX, 4); 5) anointing with the oil of catechumens, making us the “athletes of Christ” (cf. Chrysostom, *Bapt. Instr.*, II, 23); 6) baptism by “water and the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 3:5), restoring in us the image of God (Gen. 1:26); 7) clothing with a white garment, called the “robe of justice,” symbolic of the soul’s righteousness, free from “every blemish” (cf. Chrysostom, *Bapt. Instr.*, VII, 24); and, finally 8) handing the burning candle as a reminder to the baptized to “shine brightly with the light of faith and good works” during his or her entire life. With these ceremonies we actually conclude the administration of Holy Baptism, although in our Byzantine Rite the priest continues the ritual by imparting the Holy Mystery of Chrismation (Confirmation), **which will be treated in a separate leaflet.**

5

In order to enter into the kingdom of heaven we must be baptized (Jn. 3:5). Since infants are born in the state of original sin (Rm. 5:12-14) and many of them die before reaching maturity, infant baptism was introduced in the Church since apostolic times, as witnessed by famous teacher of Alexandria, Origen (d. 253), in his Commentary on Romans, V, 9. The Apostles remembered the admonition of our Lord: "Let the children come to Me and do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Lk. 18:16)

The second century Father of the Church, St. Irenaeus, insisted that Jesus Christ "came to save all who through Him are born again unto God: infants and children, boys and girls, young and old." (cf. his *Against Heresies*, II, 22, 4). St. John Chrysostom gives the following explanation: "We baptize the infants, although they do not have (personal) sins, that they be given the gift of sanctification, righteousness, filial adoption and inheritance (of heaven), and that as members of Christ (i. e. the Church) they become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit." (cf. *Bapt. Instr.*, III, 6)

During the fourth century, when some Christian parents began to postpone the baptism of their children to a mature age, many of the Church Fathers, like St. Basil the Great (d. 379), St. Gregory of Nazianz (d. 389), St. Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), just to mention a few, vigorously tried to eradicate such an abuse. Finally, the pristine custom to baptize little children prevailed.

6.

Since the baptismal ritual in the Byzantine Rite is constructed in such a way that the candidate must take an active part in it and answer some questions of the priest (like the renunciation of Satan, the promise to belong to Christ, the profession of faith etc.), the institution of sponsors became necessary. The sponsors bring the child to be baptized into the church and, in the name of the infant, give necessary answers as the baptismal ritual proceeds.

The main responsibility of sponsors is to secure a Christian education of their “spiritual children” and extend to them guidance in their spiritual life. St. John Chrysostom calls them “spiritual parents,” since they ought to show their paternal love by encouraging, counseling and correcting those they sponsor.” (cf. Bapt. Instr., II, 15-16) Such practice was already confirmed by the First Ecumenical Council of Nice, assembled in 325 A.D. (Canon 22).

At the beginning there was only one sponsor required. But later, in the Middle Ages, a custom to have two or more sponsors was introduced. Finally, since the 15th century, the custom of having two sponsors, male and female, prevailed, making some resemblance between natural and spiritual parents of the baptized. The Godparents also become the official witnesses of the baptism and their names are entered into the Baptismal Register.

7.

At baptism the candidates also receive their Christian name. In the first three centuries they were baptized by their birth-names. Only after 313 A.D., when Christianity became legalized in the Roman Empire, the Church Fathers began to enforce the custom to change the pagan names of the baptized into Christian names. The First Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) already legislated to this effect: “The faithful ought not to give pagan names to their children, but let the Christian people use their own names.” • (Canon 30)

The Christian names were considered those of the Apostles, Martyrs and Confessors, who would “secure for the baptized their heavenly protection” (cf. Theodoret of Cyrus, Sermon 8). Later biblical names were introduced, both from the Old and the New Testament. Also the names of Christian virtues, such as Charity, Pius, Grace, Justin, were considered Christian.

St. John Chrysostom explains: Christian parents should always give to their children such names that would inspire them to a virtuous life and serve others as a reminder of a true Christian life.” (cf. his Homily in Genesis, 21)

8.

On the fortieth day after child's birth a special ceremony is prescribed, generally known as - Churching of a Child, in imitation of the presentation of our Lord in the temple. (cf. Byzantine Leaflet Series, 1979, No. 12) As the priest is leading the mother with the child into the church (hence - churching), he says: "Enter into the house of God and adore the Son of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Adore Him who has granted to you that you should bear a child." At the conclusion of the ritual a special blessing is imparted to both mother and child while the priest sprinkles them with holy water.

Originally the churching of the newly baptized had taken place right after the baptismal ceremonies, when they were led by the clergy in a solemn procession into the church where they were received with the joyous singing of the assembly: "All you who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. Alleluia." (Gal. 3:27) After infant baptism was introduced the original churching ceremony had to be modified and developed into a special ritual (cf. Goar, Euchologion, p. 269). Nevertheless, the full development of churching took place during the 13th and 14th centuries, as testified by Simeon of Thessalonica (d. 1429): "On the fortieth day the infant again is brought to church by its mother, who offers her child to God as a gift." Then he gives a complete description of the ceremonial (cf. Simeon's On Sacraments, 60).

Byzantine Leaflet Series

No. 47

With Ecclesiastical Approbation March 1989

Byzantine Seminary Press

Pittsburgh, PA 15214

**Connect with Baptism -
CHRISMATION THE SEAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Holy Baptism is our mystical participation in Heaster, since having “died to sin,” through baptism we rise with Christ to live in newness of life” (Rom. 6:2-4) as children of God. By Holy Chrismation, which in the Byzantine Rite is administered immediately after baptism, we mystically participate in Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us.

Holy Chrismation is performed by anointing with a sacred oil, consecrated by the bishop on Holy Thursday (cf. Byzantine Leaflet Series, 1987, No. 37), called - chrism. Hence the proper name of the mystery - Holy Chrismation. In Greek the chrism is called - myron, therefore in Old-Slavonic the mystery is called - Myropomazaniye, meaning the anointing with myro. In the Western World they call this sacrament - Confirmation.

1.

Our Lord Jesus Christ promised to His apostles to send them “another Advocate - the Spirit of truth.” (Jn. 14:16-17) And He kept His promise since on that memorable first Pentecost all the apostles “were filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:4) But our Lord promised to send the Holy Spirit also to all those who will “believe in Him.” (Jn. 7:39) Therefore St. Peter assured the crowd in Jerusalem: “Repent and be baptized..., and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise that was made is for you and your children, and for all those - whom the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:38-39)

At the beginning the apostles bestowed the Holy Spirit upon the newly baptized by the imposition of their hands (Acts 8:17). Since they also administered Holy Orders by the “imposition of hands” (Acts 6:6), under the guidance of the same Holy Spirit, they agreed to anoint the newly baptized with the holy oil in Greek - *chrisma* means anointing) and make them indeed - Christians, the anointed ones. Just as St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) explained to his neophytes: “Now you have been made Christs (the anointed ones), for you have received the emblem of the Holy Spirit - the holy Unction.” (cf. his Catechetical Lectures, XXI, 1)

This change seems to be indicated already by St. Paul: “The One who anointed us is God - giving us the Spirit” (2 Cor. 1:21-22); and also by St. John the Evangelist: “You have the anointing that comes from the Holy One. “ (1 Jn. 2:20) In the biblical sense the anointing means the reception of the Holy Spirit. The first patristic testimony concerning the anointing comes to us from the second half of the second century, given by St. Theophilus of Antioch (d. about 180 A.D.): “We are called Christians, because we were anointed with the oil of God.” (cf. his *To Autolyucus*, 12)

2.

Since Apostolic Times, Holy Chrismation took place immediately after Baptism, as testified by the Acts of the Apostles, 19:5-6. St. Cyril explains: "Christ, having been washed in the Jordan River, imparted the fragrance of His divinity to the waters. As He was coming up from the waters, the Holy Spirit in His fullness enlighten Him, like resting upon Him. In the same manner, after you had come up from the pool of the sacred streams (Baptism, you were given the unction, the antitype of that wherewith Christ was anointed, the Holy Spirit." (cf. Cat. Lectures, XXI, 1)

Holy Chrismation originally was administered together with Baptism by both the Eastern and the Western Churches. It was usually performed by the bishop. But after the introduction of infant Baptism and the discontinuation of the solemn celebration of Christian initiation, the administration of these mysteries was entrusted to the priests. Then a difficulty arose regarding Chrismation, since from apostolic times it became the prerogative of the bishops, as testified by the Apostolic Constitutions: "Let the bishop anoint those that had been baptized with the (holy) ointment." (III, 16)

In the West, during the ninth century, the administration of Chrismation was separated from Baptism and reserved to the bishop. But in the East the bishop consecrated and distributed the holy chrism to his priests, who then administered Holy Chrismation to the infants, right after Holy Baptism. On this point the Council of Laodicea, which convened in the middle of the fourth century, clearly stated: "Those who are being initiated immediately after Baptism must be anointed with the heavenly chrism and become partakers of the kingdom of Christ." (Canon 48).

3.

The Fathers of the Church always considered Holy Chrismation as a completion of Baptism, bringing it to its perfection, i. e. to spiritual regeneration by “water and the (Holy) Spirit.” (Jn. 3:6) Thus for example the fifth century anonymous author of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy calls Holy Chrismation a “perfective anointing,” conferring to us a “gift of the divine Spirit.” (Chapter IV, 3, 11) Therefore, consecrating chrism, the bishop prays: “Make this chrism for those being baptized to be - the seal of perfection.” (cf. Goar, Euchologion, p. 503)

The pristine ritual of “giving the Holy Spirit,” as presented to us by the Acts of the Apostles (8:15-17), was very simple: a) Prayer-St. Peter and John in Samaria “prayed for them that they (the baptized Samaritans) might receive the Holy Spirit;” b) Imposition of hands- soon changed to the anointing with the holy oil, as mentioned before; c) Invocation of the Holy Spirit- perhaps with St. Peter’s words: “Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:28)

The chrismation ritual had developed in its present form already in the third century, as recorded in the Euchologion of Bishop Serapion of Thmuis (d. in about 362). The invocation of the Holy Spirit, i. e. the chrismal formula certainly remained the same: “Being regenerated and renewed by the washing (baptism) of a new birth, let them become partakers of the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (cf. Euchologion, IV, 16) We also know that the great Alexandrian theologian, Clement (d. before 215 A.D.), referred to chrismation as the “Blessed seal.” (cf. his Stromata, 3)

The connection between the anointing and the seal is clearly indicated by St. Paul, saying: “It is God who anointed us and has also put His seal upon us, giving us the (Holy) Spirit.” (2 Cor. 1:21-22) Hence the invocation of the Holy Spirit, as used today in the Byzantine Rite, was formulated since ancient times. It reads: THE SEAL OF THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. This formulary can be traced at least to the fourth century, since the Second Ecumenical Council, celebrated in Constantinople in 381 A.D., ordained that the newly-baptized should be “anointed with holy chrism (myron) upon the forehead, eyes, nostrils, mouth and ears. As they are anointed (sealed), we say: The Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Canon 7)

4.

Through Holy Baptism a seed of divine life is planted in the Christian's soul, making him or her a child of God. Then the Holy Spirit, given in Holy Chrismation, makes this seed of divine life sprout in the soul and grow to its maturity, "to the extent of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:13). As we grow older, we must cooperate with the Holy Spirit working in our soul. Hence all the members of our body become anointed with holy chrism in order that they be moved and guided by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The older writers, like St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), mention the forehead, the eyes, the nostrils, the mouth, the ears and the breast of the newly-baptized to be anointed. St. Cyril explains that we are anointed on our forehead - to be marked as a property of God; on our eyes- in order to be able to behold "with unveiled face the glory of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18); on our ears - to be prepared to listen to the teachings of the Gospel; on our nostrils - that, perceiving the sweet aroma of chrism, we may become "a sweet aroma of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:15); on our mouth-to be able to boldly profess the true faith; and finally on our breast- that having put on "a breastplate of righteousness" (Eph. 6:14), we may stand firm against the wiles of the evil one.

Then he continues: "As Jesus Christ, after His baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Him, went forth and vanquished the adversary (Lk. 4:1-13), so likewise you, after Holy Baptism and the Mystical Chrism, having put on the whole armor of the Holy Spirit, are to stand against the power of the adversary and vanquish it, saying with St. Paul (Phil. 4:13): can do all things in Christ who strengthens me!" (cf. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, XXI, 3-4)

The anointing of hands and feet was added much later. They are mentioned for the first time in the Sinaitic Euchologion, a manuscript from the ninth or tenth century. The hands- are anointed, since every Christian must "be ready to do good works" (Tit. 3:1); and the feet - since we have to "walk (to live) not according to the flesh but according to the spirit." (Rom. 8:4)

St. Cyril of Jerusalem concludes his explanation about the anointings with the holy chrism with the following words: "This holy ointment (the chrism) is symbolically applied to your forehead and to your other senses. While the body is anointed with the visible ointment, your soul is sanctified by the Holy and life-giving Spirit." (cf. Catech. Lectures, XXI, 3)

5.

During the first centuries the newly baptized, after their Chrismation, were escorted by the clergy into the church to take part in the celebration of the Holy Liturgy and to receive First Holy Communion. As they entered the church the faithful welcomed them with what at that time was the Entrance Hymn: “All you who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ, Alleluia,” (Gal. 3:27) From this point on the celebration of the Holy Liturgy continued.

Sometime during the eighth century, when infant baptism prevailed, the Rite of Christian Initiation became separated from the celebration of the Holy Liturgy and became a distinct service. As a liturgical service it then needed a proper conclusion of ritual. Thus the eighth century document, the so-called Barberini Code, already records the concluding ritual, as we have it today. It included: the Prokimenon (Ps. 27:1), scriptural readings of the Epistle (Rom. 6:3-11) and Gospel (Mt. 28:16-20), as well as the Insistent Ekteny with a special petition for the “newly enlightened (baptized)” that he or she may be “sustained in a pure profession of faith, in all holiness, and in the fulfillment of the commandments of Christ.”

At long last the ritual of Christian Initiation comes to its end and is concluded with a proper dismissal, as every liturgical service does in the Byzantine Rite.

Byzantine Leaflet Series

No. 47

With Ecclesiastical Approbation March 1989

Byzantine Seminary Press

Pittsburgh, PA 15214

THE HOLY MYSTERY OF MATRIMONY

The Holy Mystery (Sacrament) of Matrimony is one of the seven channels of Divine Grace, instituted by Christ, to sanctify and to support Christian family life. A Christian marriage is a vocation, that is a special invitation of God to two baptized persons to marital union, in order to devote themselves to the service of a new life in Christ. That is why St. Paul considers Christian marriage as a “special gift of God.” (1 Cor. 7:7) The Council Fathers of Vatican I did not hesitate to underscore the great importance of married life, sanctified by a “special Sacrament.” (cf. Constitution on the Church, n. 35).

1.

The very first pages of Holy Scriptures give witness to the great dignity of matrimony, indicating special reasons for its institution by Almighty God. Created to the “image and likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26, man was endowed by God with a spiritual soul. While the body is passed on from the parents to their children through the process of generation, the human soul, the “breath of life” (Gen. 2:7), must be instilled as if by breathing directly by God. In other words, God must necessarily enter into marital union, so that the procreation of children and the propagation of the human race may be assured.

Having made man “male and female,” God blessed them and said: “Be fertile and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:27-28), in cooperation with God’s design of procreation. Thus the spiritual nature of man and his vocation to cooperate with God in the propagation of the human race constitute the great dignity of matrimony, especially when it is sanctified by the Church, as ordered by Jesus.

While the first chapter of the Book of Genesis bears witness to the dignity of marriage, the second chapter presents matrimony as the institution of God. We are told by the sacred writer that Adam felt lonely, since there was “no suitable partner” for him. (Gen. 2:18) So, God formed a woman out of his rib in order to emphasize her equality with man my bones, and flesh of my flesh!” (Gen. 2:23)

At this point of the primordial story, the sacred author adds an important reflection, which later Jesus made His own: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and clings to his wife; and the two of them become one body.” (Gen. 2:24 = Mt. 19:5) By these words the sacred writer intended to point out that the marital union is honorable, since it was willed by God.

2.

In the Old Testament, marriage had no specifically religious character and was considered rather as a private matter. Over the course of centuries however, under the influence of pagan customs and the tolerance of the Mosaic Law, the pristine institution of marriage became to a certain degree perverted. Hence our Lord, who came “to restore the law” (Mt. 5:17), among other things, had to restore also marriage to its pristine honor and dignity, as it was originally intended by God, proclaiming divorce unlawful.

The Pharisees, in order to discredit Jesus before the people, insisted that divorce was lawful, since it was permitted by Moses himself. (Deut. 24:1-4) But Jesus retorted: “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning it was not so!” (Mt. 19:8) Then, turning to the people, He explained: “From the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So, they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, no human being must separate!” (Mr. 10:5-8)

In other words, in order to restore the marriage to its pristine dignity as willed by God, the Mosaic permission of divorce had to be revoked and the indissolubility of marriage had to be renewed. Jesus, by the divine authority invested in Him, did just that by the following statements: “I say to you, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery” (Mt. 19:9); and “If a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mr. 19:12).

3.

The Fathers of the Church, especially St. Epiphanius (+ 403), St. Augustine (+ 430), and St. Cyril of Alexandria (+444), are unanimous in teaching that Jesus Christ sanctified and elevated Christian marriage to the dignity of mystery (sacrament) by His presence at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, where He also performed His first miracle. This is the reason why the Gospel of St. John, describing the miracle at the wedding in Cana, is read at the marriage ceremony. (Jn. 2:1-11)

The holiness and mystical character of Christian marriage are beautifully explained by St. Paul in his famous epistle to the Ephesians. St. Paul models conjugal love and fidelity on the mystical union of Jesus Christ with His Church, and points out that our Lord, out of love for the Church, “handed Himself over to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word (baptism), that He might present to himself the Church in splendor, ... that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Eph. 5:25-27)

Having proposed the mystical union of Christ with the Church to the spouses as a perfect model of their conjugal relationship, St. Paul exclaims: “This is a great mystery!” (Eph. 5:32) In other words, the Apostle himself admits that such was a high ideal to strive for in married life, but still he expected Christian spouses to try to imitate the ideal as much as possible, of course with the help of God’s grace. Hence this passage of St. Paul’s epistle is also read at the wedding ceremony. (Eph. 5:20-33)

4.

According to the teaching of Vatican I, Jesus Christ, the Divine Spouse of the Church, comes into the life of Christian spouses “through the Sacrament of Matrimony. And thereafter He abides with them so that, just as He loved the Church and handed himself over on her behalf (Eph. 5:25), so also the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-giving. Then true married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power and the saving action of the Church.”

“For this reason, Christian spouses have at their disposition a special sacrament by which they become fortified and receive a kind of consecration for the duties and dignity of their marital state. By virtue of this sacrament, as the spouses faithfully fulfill their conjugal and family obligations, they become penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their entire life with faith, hope, and charity. cf. Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 48)

The Church Fathers, from early times, insisted that Christian marriage be celebrated in the church, being solemnized with the religious rites. Already St. Ignatius of Antioch (+ 110) ordained: “It is proper for those who marry to be united with the consent of the bishop (presbyter), so that the marriage may be according to the Lord and not according to lust.” (cf. his Epistle to Polycarp, 5) And St. John Chrysostom: “Do you want Christ to come and sanctify your marriage? Then invite the priest. Through His servant Christ will come and sanctify your marriage, just as He did it at Cana.” (cf. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. XLI, col. 210)

To make Jesus really and truly present at the Christian wedding, the Church Fathers ordained that the marriage be celebrated with the Holy Liturgy, in order that the spouses could receive the living Christ in Holy Communion and thus permit Him to sanctify their wedlock. (cf. Eastern Canon Law, can. 783, 2)

5.

Over the centuries, the ritual of marriage was subject to various changes and additions. It received its present form only in the middle of the seventeenth century, when two originally separated rites, that of Betrothal and of Crowning, were combined into one Ritual of Marriage (cf. P. Mohyla, *Trebynk/Ritual*/, Kiev 1646).

Originally, a Christian wedding was preceded by a Rite of Betrothal, which consisted of a ring ceremony and a priestly blessing. The use of rings at the betrothal is already mentioned by Clement of Alexandria (+ about 215). To avoid all canonical implications that later were imposed on church betrothal by the Council of Trullo (691), the majority of engagements were celebrated privately, without the presence of a priest. For this reason, the Rite of Betrothal, often referred to by the Fathers as the Ring Ceremony, was then celebrated immediately before the marriage, but still as a separate service. It was Metropolitan Peter Mohyla of Kiev who finally inserted the Ring Ceremony into the Marriage Ritual in his ritual book, called *trebynk*, printed in 1646. The Byzantine Church, nevertheless, preserved also the old Rite of Betrothal as a venerable “ancient tradition,” but all its canonical implications were revoked (cf. Eastern Canon Law, can. 782). The wedding rings symbolize the pledge of fidelity between the spouses.

Since Christian marriage is indissoluble and its validity depends on the free consent of spouses, Metropolitan Mohyla also inserted an explicit and public exchange of the marital vows before the crowning ceremony. While exchanging their vows, the spouses join their right hands and place them on the Gospel Book, and the celebrating priest covers their hands with the epitrachellion. The ceremony of joining the hands is very old and is already mentioned by St. Gregory of Nazianz (+ 389). It symbolizes the presence of Christ who, through his servant-priest, confirms the marital union, saying: “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” (Mt. 19:6)

The exchange of vows is followed by a moving ceremony of crowning, mentioned already by St. John Chrysostom (+40), by which the marriage becomes officially recognized by the Church. The crowning of spouses was adapted from the Old Testament Is. 61:10). It symbolizes the “glory and honor” of Christian marriage, since it was instituted by God and elevated by Christ to the dignity of the holy mystery (sacrament).

The crowns should remind the spouses that in their marital union they must assist and help each other to attain “unfading crown of glory” in heaven (1 Pet. 5:4), as suggested by the concluding prayer, recited by the celebrant: “O God, our God, ... accept their crowns into your kingdom, keeping them pure, blameless and above all reproach.”

Behold the beauty and deep spiritual meaning of Christian marriage, sanctified and blessed by our Lord, Jesus Christ, who through His holy mysteries (sacraments) continues to live and act in union with His mystical Spouse, the Catholic Church. On the Cover: Raphael (+ 1520), Betrothal of Mary, Vatican Museum.

Byzantine Leaflet Series

No. 47

With Ecclesiastical Approbation March 1989

Byzantine Seminary Press

Pittsburgh, PA 15214

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

The Evangelists tells that Our Lord Jesus Christ from the very beginning of His public life showed His merciful love and compassion toward the sick and the suffering who were seeking His help. And St. Matthew assures us that Jesus “cured every disease and illness.” (Mt. 9:35) In other words, Jesus considered the healing of the sick as a part of His messianic mission (Is. 61:1), and afterward He entrusted this healing mission also to His disciples. (Mt. 10:8)

Christ’s mission did not stop at mere bodily healing, for the primary concern of His mission was the healing of the souls, the salvation of the world. Hence, He instituted a special sacrament, the Anointing of the Sick, which is one of the seven Holy Mysteries of salvation entrusted to the Church.

1.

The Holy Mystery of Anointing was foreshadowed by the ministry of healing, entrusted to the Apostles by Jesus himself, as recorded by St. Mark: “And they (the Apostles) anointed many sick people with oil, and healed them.” (Mr. 6:13) In these words of the Evangelist some theologians see the origin of the Holy Mystery (Sacrament) of Anointing. The promulgation of the Holy Anointing came by St. James the Apostle, saying: “Is anyone among you sick? Let him summon the presbyters of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed any sins, they will be forgiven him.” (Jm. 5:14-15)

According to the interpreters of the Scriptures, by these words St. James transmitted the apostolic practice concerning the administration of the Anointing of the Sick as it was instituted by Jesus Christ (“in the name of the Lord”).

2.

Since the beginning, the Holy Anointing of the Sick was administered privately, hence in the writings of the Church Fathers during the first centuries of Christianity it was mentioned only incidentally, without any doctrinal explanation. For the first time the Anointing is mentioned at the end of the first century in the so-called Teachings of the Twelve Apostles (cf. *Didache*, 10). At the end of the second century it is mentioned, again only incidentally, by St. Irenaeus in his book *Against Heresies* (b. 1, ch. 21).

In the third century it was Origen (+ 255) who first quoted the Epistle of St. James to support his doctrine on the holy anointing (cf. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. XII, coll. 417-418. And in the fourth century it was St. Athanasius the Great (+ 373) who alluded to the anointing in his commentary on the Psalms (cf. Migne, P. G., XXVII, 405). The Syrian writer Aphraat (+ 345) presented the anointing already as “the Mystery of life” (cf. *Demonstrations*, 23). Also, St. John Chrysostom (+ 407) explained the “anointing of faith” with the words of St. James (cf. Migne, P. G., XLVII, 584). Thus, by the fourth century, the doctrine and the administration of the Holy Anointing of the Sick were already firmly established.

Starting with the fifth century the Church Fathers, such as St. Augustine (+ 430), St. Cyril of Alexandria (+444), Victor of Antioch (5th c.), and others, treat the Mystery of Holy Oil (Greek: *Euchelaion*) already with greater deliberation and detail, considering it as a complement of Penance. The first complete presentation of the Holy Anointing as Mystery (Sacrament) was made by Pope St. Innocent I (+417), in his epistle to Bishop Decentius, which also includes an authentic interpretation of the scriptural text of St. James (cf. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, XX, 559-560).

In view of these and many other testimonies, the apostolic origin and constant practice of the Church in administering the Holy Anointing to the sick can be safely upheld and defended. In the early Lives of the Saints, like in the Life of St. Hypatius (+ 446) or the Life of St. Eutichius (+ 582), we actually read that they, before passing to a better life, received the Holy Anointing with great devotion and contrition of heart.

3.

The ritual of the Holy Anointing, as administered in the Byzantine Church, reaches back to the eighth century (cf. J. Goar, *Euchologion*, Venice 1730, reprinted Graz 1960). According to Goar, the individual prayers of the ritual are much older and are in use also by the other Eastern Churches.

The most ancient prayer for the “blessing of the oil of the sick” is from the first half of the fourth century, and was preserved in the recently discovered *Euchologion* of Serapius, bishop of Thmuis near Alexandria. A similar prayer can be found in the work of Syrian origin entitled: the *Apostolic Constitutions*, from the end of the fourth century (cf. Migne, P. G., 1, 1125). Both these prayers indicate that by the fourth century the Holy Anointing was already administered by the entire Church.

According to the tradition, previously also followed by the Western Churches, the Holy Anointing was conferred by several priests in accordance with the words of St. James: “Let him summon the presbyters of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil.” Through the centuries the number of the priests varied. In the Byzantine rite the custom prevailed to call up to seven priests (if available), since in the Bible the number seven is considered a “perfect number” (comp. Is. 11:2-3; 2 Kgs. 5:14; Acts 21:26-27).

Because of scarcity of priests, It is generally admitted that even one priest is sufficient to administer the Holy Mystery of Anointing, even in the Byzantine rite. Our present abbreviated form of ritual was approved by the Holy See, and it reflects the ritual codified by Metropolitan Peter Mohyla of Kiev in 1646 (cf. P. Mohyla, *Trebnyk*, Kiev 1646).

4.

The ritual of the Anointing begins with the series of prayers, including the Our Father, which constitute the so-called Customary Beginning. These are followed by Psalm 142(143), describing confidence in the Lord at time of distress. Then the Ekteny of Peace is recited with two special petitions, imploring Almighty God to send down the Holy Spirit, first to sanctify the oil, then to sanctify the sick. The introductory part of the ritual ends with the blessing of oil to be used in anointing.

The central part of the ritual starts with scriptural readings, introduced by the Proki-menon: "May your kindness, O Lord, be upon us, who have placed our hope in you." (Ps 33:22) The Epistle is taken from that of St. James, telling us about the anointing (Jm. 5:10-16). Then the Gospel is read, describing the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). The Gospel is followed by the Insistent Ekteny, imploring God "for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, (divine) visitation, and forgiveness of sins" of the sick, that the Lord "send upon him (her) the grace of deliverance from illness, raising him (her) from his (her) sickbed."

The actual anointing of sick is preceded by a short prayer, invoking the power of the Holy Spirit to descend upon the blessed oil and make it for the sick person "a perfect deliverance from his (her) sins and an inheritance of the kingdom of heaven." (cf. Prayer on back cover). Then, dipping his finger into the holy oil, the priest, reciting the Prayer of the Anointing (cf. back cover), anoints the sick person on the forehead (the seat of bad thoughts), the five external senses (eyes, ears, nostrils, lips and hands) as organs of sensuality, the chest as the seat of the heart ("From the heart comes all evil" - says the Lord, Mt. 15:19), and the feet, leading us astray on the path of iniquity. All these must be healed by the divine grace, since they hide in themselves the "remnants of sin." Thus, according to the teaching of some Fathers, the soul of sick persons becomes completely purified as it was at the time of the Baptism.

After the anointing, to make Jesus mystically present, the Gospel Book is placed over the head of the sick, while the priest is entreating "the merciful Lord" to forgive his or her sins. This is done in conformity with the words of St. James: "If he (the sick person) has committed any sins he (she) will be forgiven." (Jm. 5:15) Thus, in case the sick person is unable to confess his or her sins on account of impaired speech or lack of memory, the Holy Anointing becomes the sacrament of salvation, forgiving sins, provided the sick person has at least habitual sorrow for his (her) sins.

5.

Following the ritual of the Holy Anointing we can clearly perceive all the spiritual benefits of this Holy Mystery. It not only increases sanctifying grace in the soul of the sick person (through the descent of the Holy Spirit), but also delivers him (her) from all the remnants of sin. In case of emergency, it even substitutes for Penance, forgiving sins.

The Anointing also brings to the sick a spiritual comfort and relief in his (her) sufferings, inspiring him or her to turn to the merciful goodness of God with all confidence and trust. Thus, the sick is encouraged to endure more patiently his (her) sufferings and to resist with greater determination all the temptations and assaults of the evil one. In other words, the Holy Anointing confers to the sick a special, so-called sacramental grace of spiritual strength and endurance.

In some instances the Holy Anointing obtains even a physical healing of the sick, when it is advantageous for the person's salvation. Of course, bodily healing is not a primary purpose of this sacrament. But when it does occur, it shows in a visible way the working of Christ's merciful love through the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) instituted by Him.

Through the Holy Anointing Jesus always comes to the sick and invites them to join Him in their sufferings, according to the exalted example of St. Paul: "I rejoice in my sufferings, since in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ on behalf of his Church." (Col. 1:14) In return, Jesus extends His divine help to sick persons to bear more patiently their sufferings in union with His own. And in case of their dying, Jesus is ready to take them with himself to heaven, as He promised the repentant thief: "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise!" (Lk. 23:43)

Let us then remember: "Blessed are those who die in the Lord!" (Rev. 14:13)

Byzantine Leaflet Series

No. 47

With Ecclesiastical Approbation March 1989

Byzantine Seminary Press

Pittsburgh, PA 15214

CHRISTIAN BURIAL ACCORDING TO THE BYZANTINE RITE TRADITION

“Even the bodies of those, who live with God, are not without an honor” (Apostolic Constitutions VI, 30).

Inspired by the description of the burial of our Lord in the Gospels, Christians from the very beginning buried their dead with proper care and ceremonies. They believed that the body of every Christian was indeed “a temple of God” and, as such, it also was holy (I Cor. 3:16-17). In expectation of the “resurrection of the dead,” Christians believe that their bodies will once again be united with their souls and live forever.

The Christian belief in the resurrection of the body was then the main reason why, since ancient times, the “funerals were arranged, the obsequies celebrated and the tombs prepared with a reverent piety” among the Christians (cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God* I, 13). The burial of the Christian has a deeply religious meaning and, therefore, embodies certain religious ceremonies and customs which will be the topic of this pamphlet.

1

The first Christians, anchored by their faith in the Risen Savior, considered death as their final liberation from earthly exile and their triumphant entry into the Promised Land. For them, death was the last major obstacle in reaching their eternal happiness. Therefore they buried their dead with thanksgiving and accompanied the bodies of their departed to the grave in a triumphant procession, reminding us of the victory marches of ancient war heroes. By dying in the Lord, St. Paul explains, the death of every Christian is “swallowed up in victory” (I Cor. 15:54). Thus, every deceased Christian becomes a victor, marching triumphantly toward his immortality in order to be “crowned with honor and glory” (Hebr. 2:7). Consequently, even the body of a deceased Christian was arranged in such a way as to give the corpse a triumphant look.

The first gesture of respect for the deceased is to close his eyes. Usually this is done by the closest relative of the departed. In his book, *The Life of St. Macrina*, St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395) tells us that his sister Macrina asked him to close her eyes after she dies. And he continues: “So, I placed my hand, deadened by grief, upon her holy face so as to seem to disregard her request. Actually, her eyes required no attention, since her eyelids were becoming lowered as if she was asleep. Her lips were set naturally, and her hands were crossed on her breast. The whole position of her body was so natural that there was no need of any further arrangement.” This insignificant service to the deceased was regarded not only as a duty, but as an honor.

2.

When a Christian dies, his body should be washed clean. This is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (9:37) about a certain convert, Tabitha: “They washed her body and laid it out in a room upstairs.” This ceremonial washing symbolizes the purity of the soul, for “nothing un-clean” can enter into the Kingdom of heaven (Rev. 21:27). St. Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389), reprimanding the Christians for delaying the baptism of their children, says: “Are you waiting to be washed when dead?” (cf. Oration 40, 17).

Then the body should be dressed in new, festive clothes, symbolizing the garment of incorruption in which the body is clothed at the time of its resurrection: “This corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, this mortal body with immortality” (I Cor. 15:53). St. Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 265) tells us that the pious Christians, even during pestilence, prepared the dead “suitably” for their burial by “washing their bodies and adorning them with funeral clothes.”

St. Gregory of Nyssa offered his new episcopal robe for the burial of his sister St. Macrina, since she did not set aside any new garment for her own funeral. And the saintly brother remarks: “It was necessary for her sacred body to be dressed in festive garments.”

3.

The body of the deceased is then laid out on a catafalque, an elevated stand draped with covers, which represents a bed, since Christians considered their dead only as fallen asleep. St. Jerome (d. 420) explains: “For us Christians, death is not death but rather a sleep or rest” (cf. Epistle 75).

St. Luke, describing the stoning of St. Stephen, the First Martyr, tells us that he “fell asleep” (Acts 7:60). St. John Chrysostom, explaining a certain passage of St. Paul (I Thess. 4:13) says: “He (St. Paul) did not give us instruction concerning the dying, but concerning them that are asleep. With this the Apostle proved that our death is only a sleep ..., a longer one of course, but still a sleep” (cf. Homily on Paral., 8). Our Lord Himself referred to the dead daughter of Jarius (Mit. 9:24) and to His friend Lazarus (Jn. 11:11) as asleep.

The hands of the deceased should be folded on his chest in the form of a cross, as though he would be still praying together with those around him. It is also proper to put a prayer book, or a holy icon, into his hands. A more recent custom is to put a rosary into the hands of the deceased. But this should be done only if the deceased had a devotion to the Rosary and used to pray it during his life. Folding the hands of the deceased in a praying fashion also is to remind the mourners to pray for the repose of his soul.

Usually, four burning candles are placed around the body to remind us that the deceased, as a baptized person, was indeed “a child of light” (I Thess. 5:5) and that, after following Christ, the Light of Life (Jn. 8:12) during his earthly life, he finally reached the “perpetual light” in heaven (cf. explanation in P. G., vol. 155, col. 676).

4.

The Christians always considered it their sacred duty to take part in the prayers for the deceased members of their community. During the persecutions, however, they were able to come together for such prayers only under the cover of night. Usually, they spent all night watching the body of the departed, reciting various prayers and psalms. Only at sunrise, after the celebration of the Holy Liturgy, did they bury the body in a prepared place. Through the influence of monastic custom, these all-night vigils became part of the Christian burial, as attested to by St. Gregory of Nyssa in his description of the funeral of his sister, St. Macrina: "There was an all-night vigil with singing of psalms as was the custom." These all-night vigils with burning candles and singing of psalms symbolize the entrance of the Christian soul into the company of the Angels, praising God "day and night, without pause" (Rev. 4:8).

Later the all-night vigils were somewhat shortened and they became our present day wakes, which usually are initiated by the celebration of Parastas (Gr. *parastedzein* means: to stand beside), the standing service beside the body of the departed. Then follow the prayers of various groups or church societies. After having rendered their respects to the deceased by their prayer, the people gathered together in the reception room to express their personal condolences to the bereaved members of the family. In gratitude, the family of the deceased served some food and refreshments to those who came to offer their condolences.

After the refreshments, the second part of the night-vigil began with the reading of the Book of Psalms. In the case of the funeral of a priest, the Book of Gospels was read. On the morning of burial, when the body of the deceased was already placed in the coffin, a short service, known as Panachida was chanted by the priest, who also sprinkled the coffin with holy water so that the evil spirits would not disturb the peaceful rest of the deceased. This marked the conclusion of what one time used to be the All-night Service (in Greek *Pannychis*, meaning all night vigil), from which this short, concluding part of the all-night services retained its name.

The early Christians, as mentioned before, considered the death of a Christian a victory. Therefore, they arranged the funeral procession in a way of triumph, as a triumphant march of victory. The tenth century Saint says: "Death prevents me only from staying alive, but not from my living. In this sense, as a Christian, I triumph over death" (St. Athanasius the Athonite, d. 1003).

The funeral procession should be headed by the holy Cross, which is "a trophy of victory over the tyranny of death" (cf. St. John Chrys., Homily one top of the A win lor so fomes carried separately) which is a symbol of the victorious "crown of life" which Our Lord promised to give to all those who remain faithful to Him until

death” (Rev. 2:10). The clergy were instructed to take part in the funeral procession, as a fourth century document prescribes (ct. Apost. Const., VI, 30) saying: “in the funerals of the departed, accompany them with singing (of Psalms) if they remained faithful to Christ, since precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His faithful ones” (Psalms. 116:15).

The clergy, in the funeral procession, should precede the coffin just as the adjutants preceded their victorious commander. The priest, by his prayers, teachings, and the administration of the Sacraments, assisted the departed during his life in his struggle and victory over the enemy of salvation. It is appropriate, therefore, that the priest now accompanies the deceased to his final rest with his Maker.

The funeral procession then proceeds to the church where the Divine Liturgy is offered for the repose of the soul of the departed, as was customary from the early centuries: “For your Brethren that fall asleep in the Lord, in your church, offer the acceptable Eucharist... “ (cf. Apost. Const., VI, 30). The Liturgy is followed by the proper Funeral Services, bidding our farewell to the deceased.

From church, the body of the deceased is once again carried out in triumphal procession to the cemetery (Gr. koimeterion— sleeping place, a place of rest) where, according to the disposition of God, it is returned to the earth: “You are the earth and into the earth you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). And there, in their “sleeping chambers” in their graves, the bodies of the departed Christians are peacefully awaiting the resurrection of the dead,” for their and our “hope is full of immortality” (Wis. 3:4).

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