The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom

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INTRODUCTION: THE HEARTBEAT OF BYZANTINE WORSHIP

For millions of Orthodox Christians around the world, Sunday morning is not simply a time for rest. It is the appointed hour to step out of the ordinary rhythm of life and into the timeless, heavenly reality of the Eucharist. At the center of this weekly encounter stands a text of unparalleled spiritual depth and beauty: **The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom**. More than a mere service or a collection of prayers, this liturgy is a tapestry woven from scripture, ancient hymnody, and profound theological reflection. It is the most frequently celebrated Eucharistic service in the Byzantine Rite, serving as the primary means through which the faithful are united with Christ and with one another.

To attend this liturgy is to enter a

different dimension of time. The words spoken and sung are not new compositions; they have been chanted for nearly seventeen centuries. The structure, the prayers, the very movements of the clergy are steeped in a tradition that connects the modern worshiper directly to the early Church. Understanding **The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom** is key to understanding the soul of Eastern Christianity. It is not a performance to be watched, but a journey to be undertaken—a journey from the visible world into the invisible Kingdom of God. This article will explore the history, structure, theological meaning, and living practice of this ancient and beloved service, revealing why it remains the central act of worship for the Orthodox Church.

WHO WAS SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM?

Before delving into the liturgy itself, it is essential to understand the man whose name it bears. Saint John Chrysostom (c. 347–407 AD) was the Archbishop of Constantinople, renowned for his exceptional preaching ability. His name, "Chrysostom," literally means "golden-mouthed" in Greek, a title awarded to him posthumously in recognition of his eloquence. However, he was far more than a skilled orator.

Archbishop and Reformer

John lived during a turbulent period in Church history, a time when Christianity was emerging from persecution and facing new challenges of wealth, power, and theological division. As Archbishop, he was a tireless reformer who sought to root out corruption among the clergy and the imperial court alike. His homilies were direct, challenging, and deeply scriptural. He did not shy away from condemning the lavish lifestyles of the rich while the poor starved, a message that made him powerful enemies.

The Liturgical Connection

While Saint John Chrysostom is credited with the liturgy that bears his name, it is important to clarify his role. He did not compose the liturgy from scratch. Rather, he is traditionally believed to have taken an existing liturgical structure—likely the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great—and shortened and streamlined it for more frequent use. The Liturgy of Saint Basil is still celebrated ten times a year, but the daily and Sunday celebration is Chrysostom's recension. This simplification made the service more accessible to the growing urban population of Constantinople. The

title **The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom** reflects his role as the editor and popularizer who gave the service its definitive form, blending profound theological content with a practical, pastoral sensitivity.

THE THREEFOLD STRUCTURE OF THE LITURGY

The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom is built upon a clear and logical structure that moves the worshiper from preparation to communion. It is divided into three main parts: the Liturgy of Preparation (Proskomedia), the Liturgy of the Word (Liturgy of the Catechumens), and the Liturgy of the Faithful (Eucharistic Liturgy).

The Proskomedia: The Liturgy of Preparation

This first part is performed quietly by the priest at the Table of Oblation (Prothesis), usually before the main service begins. While the congregation may not see all the details, the Proskomedia is profoundly symbolic. The priest takes a large loaf of leavened bread (the *prosphora*) and, using a liturgical spear, cuts out a central cube called the Lamb (*Amnos*), which will be

consecrated into the Body of Christ. He then places particles on the diskos (*diskos*, or paten) in honor of the Theotokos (Mary), the angels, saints, and for the living and the dead. This action signifies that Christ is the center of the universe, and that the entire Church—both in heaven and on earth—is gathered around Him. The preparation is a quiet, intense act of intercession, setting the stage for the great sacrifice to come.

The Liturgy of the

Catechumens: The Liturgy of the Word

This is the first public part of the service. Historically, it was open to "catechumens"—those preparing for baptism—who were dismissed before the Eucharistic canon began. This section is centered on scripture, hearing, and teaching.

- **The Great Litany and Antiphons:** The service begins with a series of petitions for peace, salvation, and the Church, followed by the chanting of antiphons (often

Psalms 102 and 145) interspersed with hymns. The second antiphon is particularly famous, including the hymn "Only Begotten Son," attributed to Emperor Justinian.

- **The Little Entrance:** The clergy process with the Gospel book from the altar to the soleas (the raised platform before the iconostasis). This is a symbolic act of Christ's entry into the world to preach. The choir sings, "Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ."
- **The Troparia and Kontakia:** Hymns for the day, the saint, or the feast are chanted, establishing the liturgical theme.
- **The Trisagion Hymn:** "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us," is sung three times, a profound prayer of adoration to the Trinity.
- **The Prokeimenon and Epistle Reading:** A verse from the Psalms is chanted, followed by a reading from the Acts of the Apostles or the Epistles.
- **The Alleluia and Gospel Reading:** The Alleluia is sung with verses from the Psalms, preparing the congregation for the high point of the Liturgy of the Word: the reading of the Holy Gospel. The Gospel is read by the deacon or priest, signifying the direct presence of Christ teaching His people.
- **The Homily:** A sermon is preached, explaining the scripture readings and applying them to

daily life.

The Liturgy of the Catechumens concludes with a special litany for the catechumens and their dismissal.

The Liturgy of the Faithful: The Eucharistic Sacrifice

This is the most sacred and solemn part of the service. It is the heart of **The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom**, where bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

1. **The Great Entrance:** The choir sings the Cherubic Hymn as the clergy bring the prepared gifts (the bread and wine) from the Table of Oblation to the Holy Table (altar). This is a profound procession symbolizing Christ's journey to His Passion. The faithful bow their heads in reverence.
2. **The Litany of Supplication and the Kiss of Peace:** Following the placement of the gifts on the altar, prayers are offered for the Church and the world. The faithful are then called to exchange the kiss of peace (now often a bow), declaring that they are united in love before approaching the Eucharist.

3. **The Nicene Creed:** The entire congregation, or the choir, recites the Nicene Creed, affirming the Orthodox faith in the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation.
4. **The Anaphora (The Eucharistic Prayer):** This is the central prayer of the liturgy. It begins with the exchange, "Let us lift up our hearts!" and continues with a long prayer of thanksgiving, recalling God's saving acts in history. It includes the Words of Institution: "Take, eat, this is My Body... Drink of it, all of you, this is My Blood..."
5. **The Epiklesis:** The priest prays for the Holy Spirit to descend upon the gifts and upon the people, asking the Spirit to "change this bread into the precious Body of Thy Christ, and that which is in this cup into the precious Blood of Thy Christ." This is the moment of consecration.
6. **The Commemorations and the Lord's Prayer:** The priest prays for the saints, the Theotokos, and the living and the dead. The congregation then sings the Our Father, the perfect prayer of preparation for Communion.
7. **The Elevation and Communion:** The priest elevates the Lamb, proclaiming "The Holy Things are for the Holy People." He then breaks the Lamb into four pieces. The clergy receive communion first within the sanctuary, then the faithful approach to receive the Body and Blood of Christ from a

common spoon. This act is the culmination of the entire liturgy—union with God.

8. **The Prayer of Thanksgiving and the Dismissal:** After communion, the faithful chant, "We have seen the true Light..." and offer prayers of thanksgiving. The priest blesses the congregation, and the deacon chants the dismissal, sending the people forth to live out the Eucharist in their daily lives.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND SYMBOLISM

The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom is not a collection of random prayers. It is a unified theological vision of salvation. Every action, every word, and every movement carries profound meaning.

Heaven on Earth

One of the most powerful themes is that the liturgy is a participation in the heavenly worship described in the Book of Revelation. The faithful are not merely a congregation on earth; they are mystically joined to the angels, archangels, and all the saints who eternally praise God in heaven. This is most clearly expressed during the Sanctus: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory." The iconostasis and the icons themselves serve as windows into this heavenly realm.

The Corporate Nature of Salvation

The liturgy constantly emphasizes the communal, corporate nature of the faith. The prayers are almost always in the first-person plural ("we" and "us"). The Great Entrance, the kiss of peace, and the common cup all underscore that salvation is not an individual achievement but a shared journey. The Church is the Body of Christ, and the Eucharist makes that body a reality.

Sacrifice and Thanksgiving

The word "Eucharist" itself means "thanksgiving." The entire Anaphora is a prayer of profound gratitude to God for creation, for the covenant with Israel, and supremely for the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This thank-offering is presented to the Father, and in return, the faithful receive the consecrated gifts. The liturgy is a re-presentation of the one sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, not as a new sacrifice, but as a making-present of that eternal act of love.

THE ROLE OF MUSIC AND CHANT

In the Byzantine tradition, music is not an ornament; it is an essential vessel for theology. **The Divine Liturgy Of Saint John Chrysostom** is almost entirely sung or chanted. The congregation does not simply say prayers; they sing them. The hymnography is rich, complex, and deeply scriptural