

ST. INNOCENT ORTHODOX CHURCH SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Welcome to our first monthly Church School for Children!



Issue 1, September 15, 2017

SEPTEMBER 14, 2017

EXALTATION
(ELEVATION) OF THE
PRECIOUS CROSS

SEPTEMBER 17, 2017

MARTYR SOPHIA AND
HER DAUGHTERS
FAITH, HOPE AND
LOVE

OCTOBER 1, 2017

PROTECTION OF THE
MOST-HOLY
THEOTOKOS

OCTOBER 6, 2017

ST. INNOCENT, METR.
OF MOSCOW

"FOR THROUGH THE CROSS,
JOY HAS COME INTO THE WORLD."

Welcome To The Church School!

Dear St. Innocent Orthodox Church Family,

Welcome to the start of the 2018-2019 church school year! Fr. Theophan, teachers and helpers are looking forward to an outstanding school year. We ask that you join us in this amazing endeavor of Christianity. This year will be filled with numerous learning opportunities for our children, as well as the parents. Join forces with us and support our

children in every way possible. It is our goal to provide services to the Orthodox community in which we serve and to meet the needs of all families. Please join us, share your ideas with us as we work together to offer an Orthodox Christian education. Your feedback is important to us in achieving our goal as a Church School.

God bless!

A Homily on the Exaltation and Elevation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

THE FOURTEENTH DAY OF THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER A Homily on the Universal Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

Saint Constantine the Great (21 May) was preparing to march on Rome to confront his rival Maxentius when the sign of the Life-Giving Cross appeared to him in the midday sky, surrounded with the inscription: **by this sign you shall conquer (Gk. En Touto Nika).**

All of his soldiers also saw the sign, including the commander Artemius, who was later put to death for Christ's sake by the Emperor Julian, and they marveled. The greater part of them, because among the pagan, the image of a cross signified misfortune and death, inasmuch as thieves and evildoers were punished by execution on the cross. Even the Emperor Constantine doubted. As he slept that night, however, Christ the Lord Himself appeared to him and again revealed the sign of the precious Cross which has appeared the day before, and He said to...



Continued on page 3

St. Sophia & Her Daughters – Faith, Hope and Love



The Holy Martyrs, St. Sophia and her daughters: Faith (Fides - Vera), Hope (Spes – Nadezhda – Esperanza), and Love (Caritas – Lyubov) are commemorated on 17/30 September.

St. Sophia, a pious Christian, was widowed after the birth of her daughters, and lived during the time of the Roman Emperor HArdian (117-138).

St. Sophia raised her girls in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and they openly confessed their faith. Antiochus, an official, accused them to Emperor Hardian, and the family was brought to Rome. When they appeared before the emperor, they appeared as if they had been brought to some happy festival, rather than to torture. Hardian commanded each of the girls to offer sacrifice to the goddess Artemis, but the young girls remained unyielding...

Continued on page 6

Continued from page 2

Constantine, **"Make an image of this sign, and command that it be carried in front of the army, and not only Maxentius but all your enemies will be overcome."**

When the Emperor awoke, he related the vision to his nobles. He summoned expert goldsmiths and commanded them to fashion of gold, pearls, and precious stones a copy of the precious Cross, like the one which had appeared to him. Moreover, he ordered all his troops to make the sign of the Cross on all their weapons, helmets, and shields.

When the impious Maxentius learned that Constantine had entered Italy and was descending upon Rome, he most impudently led the Roman Army out against him. Constantine ordered that the precious Cross be carried before his army, and when his forces engaged Maxentius' army, Maxentius was defeated **by the power of the precious Cross**, and a multitude of his soldiers were cut down. Maxentius himself was forced to flee across a bridge he himself had built, pursued by the Emperor Constantine. By the power of God, however, the bridge collapsed, and the wretch was drowned in the river with his soldiers like Pharaoh of old. Constantine then entered Rome in triumph, and the people greeted him with honor and great rejoicing. Constantine gave thanks to God, Who had granted him victory over the persecutor by the power of the precious and Life-Creating Cross. In commemoration of that most glorious victory, he set up a cross in the center of the city of Rome on a tall pillar of stone, upon which was inscribed: **"This city was delivered from the yoke of the tormentor by this saving sign."**

In the twentieth year of his reign (326 A.D.), Constantine sent his mother Saint Helen with great riches to search for the Precious and Holy Cross of Christ. At that time the Patriarch was Macarius. He received the Empress with fitting honor. The blessed Empress Helen, hoping to find the Life-creating Cross of the Lord, which had been hidden from the Jews, summoned the Jews of the city and demanded that they show her the place where the precious Cross of the Lord was hidden. When they began to protest that they knew nothing, the Empress Helen threatened them. They then pointed out an old man name Judas and said, "This man is able to show you that for which you seek. He is the son of a respected prophet."

Questioned for a long time, Judas finally directed them to a place where there was a great mound covered over with dirt and stones, upon which the Roman Emperor Hadrian had built a temple to the goddess Venus, setting up her image there. Judas affirmed that the Cross of the Lord was hidden in this place.

The Empress Helen commanded that the temple of the idols be destroyed and that the dirt and stones be dug up and scattered. As her orders were being carried out, Patriarch Macarius went to pray at the spot, when to his amazement a fragrant odor filled the air. Just then, the Lord's Sepulchre and the Place of the Skull were found toward the east, and near them three crosses were uncovered, and later the precious nails were found as well. All were uncertain as to which of the crosses was the true Cross of the Lord. At that moment a corpse was being carried by to be buried. Patriarch Macarius commanded those who bore the dead to halt, and he had the crosses placed one after the other on the corpse. When the Cross of Christ was placed on him, the dead man immediately

Then the Queen and her whole court worshipped the Holy Cross and kissed it with great devotion. The people, who had gathered in large numbers at the place, also wanted to share in this grace, or at least--so ardent was their love for Christ--to see from afar the instrument of our Redemption. So the Patriarch mounted the ambo, and taking the Cross in both hands, raised (elevated) it on high so that all could see it, while the crowd exclaimed: **Kyrie Eleison! (Lord have mercy!)** This was the occasion of the institution in all the Orthodox Churches of the **Exaltation of the Precious Cross**, not only in memory of the event but also to show forth this instrument of shame as having become **our pride and our joy**. By recalling the action of the Patriarch and by elevating the Holy Cross at the four points of the compass to the chant **Kyrie Eleison**, Orthodox Christians show today that, in mounting the Cross, **Christ desired to reconcile all things to Himself, uniting creation in all its height and depth and to its farthest bounds in His body, so that we may have access through Him to the Father.**

The holy Empress Helen kept a portion of the precious Wood and the holy nails for herself. Placing the remaining portion of the Cross in a silver reliquary, she committed it to Patriarch Macarius to be preserved for future generations.

(Source: The Synaxarion and the Lives of the Saints)

An Orthodox Christian perspective on the Cross of Christ

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes of "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the Throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). A text such as this could be behind the hymn we sing at every Divine Liturgy after receiving the Holy Eucharist: "For through the Cross, joy has come into the world." Jesus Himself said "that the Son of Man must suffer many things...and be killed and after three days rise again" (St. Mark 8:31). Of the Greek word translated as "must" from these words of Christ, Archbishop Demitrios Trakatellis wrote: "This expresses the necessity (dei) of the Messiah's terrible affliction. Judging from the meaning of the verb (dei) in Mark, this necessity touches upon God's great plan for the salvation of the world" (Authority and Passion, p. 51-52).

Many such texts can be multiplied, but the point is clear; The Cross and the empty tomb - redemption and resurrection - are inseparably united in the one paschal mystery that is nothing less than "Good News." As something of an aside, part of this misunderstanding of the Orthodox Church's supposed neglect of the Cross in the drama of human redemption could stem from a one-sided emphasis on the Cross in other Christian traditions at the expense of the Resurrection. The redemptive significance of the Cross somehow overwhelms the Resurrection so that it is strangely reduced to something of a glorified appendix to the salvific meaning of the Cross.

As Vladimir Lossky wrote: "This redemptionist theology, placing all the emphasis on the passion, seems to take no interest in the triumph of Christ over death." Since the "triumph of Christ over death" is so integral to the very existence of the Church -- and since it is the ultimate paschal proclamation, as in "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death!" --then the Orthodox Church will never concentrate on a "theology of the Cross" at the expense of the Resurrection. Rather, the one paschal mystery will always embrace both Cross and Resurrection in a balanced manner. Within the Church during the week of the Cross, (beginning on the third Sunday of Great Lent), we sing and prostrate ourselves before the Cross while chanting, "Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify."

The Orthodox Church can make a huge contribution toward a more holistic and integrated understanding of the role of both Cross and Resurrection, so that the full integrity of the role of both the Cross and Resurrection, so that the full integrity of the paschal mystery is joyfully proclaimed to the world. From the patristic tradition of the Church, the voice of Saint Athanasius the Great can speak to us today of this holistic approach. "Here, then is the...reason why the Logos (Word) dwelt among us, namely that having proved His Godhead by His works, He might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, surrendering His own temple to death in place of all, to settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression. In the same act also He showed Himself mightier than death, displaying His own body incorruptible as the first-fruit of the resurrection." (On the Incarnation 20). (Source: Orthodox Church in America).

Making the Sign of the Cross

What is the significance of the sign of the cross? Well, in the first place, we often place our initials or other personal mark on something to show it belongs to us. The Cross is the personal mark of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and we mark it on ourselves **as a sign that we belong to Him**, just as in the book of Revelation, the servants of God are sealed or marked on their foreheads as a sign that they are His.

+Father George, St. Andrew Greek Orthodox Church

<http://saintandrewgoc.org/home/2015/9/15/a-homily-on-the-exaltation-and-elevation-of-the-precious-and-life-giving-cross-of-our-lord-jesus-christ>

Continued from page 2 St. Sophia & Her Daughters Faith, Hope and Love

...After undergoing unspeakable torments, the holy virgins remained steadfast to God. At the time of their martyrdom, Faith was aged twelve, Hope was ten, and Love was nine.

St. Sophia, their mother, displaying unwavering courage, was forced to watch the suffering of her daughters. She took the bodies of her daughters beyond the city where she buried them reverently, on a high hill. Sitting by their graves for three days, St. Sophia gave her soul to the Lord, herself receiving a martyr's crown.

To parents: discuss the meaning of names with your children according to their age: St. Love (3-6 y.o.), St. Hope (7-9 y.o.), St. Faith (10-13 y.o.), St. Sophia (14-18 y.o.)

**HYMNS OF THE FEAST OF THE
ELEVATION AND EXALTATION OF THE
HOLY CROSS**

Troparion (Tone 1)

O Lord, save Thy people, And bless Thine inheritance. Grant victories to the Orthodox Christians over their adversaries; and by the virtue of Thy Cross, preserve Thy habitation.

Kontakion

As Thou was voluntarily crucified for our sake, grant mercy to those who are called by Thy Name, O Christ God; make all Orthodox Christians glad by Thy power, granting them victories over their adversaries, by bestowing on them the Invincible trophy, Thy weapon of peace.

Instead of the Trisagion

Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy Holy Resurrection we glorify. (Thrice) Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen. And thy Holy Resurrection we glorify. Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy Holy Resurrection we glorify.

Forefeast Hymn Troparion (Tone 4)

We offer in supplication The Life-Creating Cross of Your Goodness, O Lord, Which You have granted to us who are unworthy: Save the Orthodox Christians, O Only Lover of Man, Through the Theotokos.

**MARTYR SOPHIA AND HER THREE
DAUGHTERS AT ROME
TROPARION & KONTAKION**

Troparion (Tone 4)

The Church celebrates and rejoices / In the feast of the three daughters: Faith, Hope, and Love / And their Mother Sophia, named for her wisdom: / For in them she gave birth to the three godly virtues. / Now they eternally behold their bridegroom, God the Word. / Let us rejoice spiritually in their memory and cry: / O our three Heavenly Protectors, / Establish, confirm and strengthen us / In Faith, Hope and Love.

Troparion (Tone 5)

You blossomed in the courts of the Lord / as a fruitful olive tree, / holy martyr Sophia; / in your contest you offered to Christ the sweet fruit of your womb, / your daughters Faith, Hope, and Love. / Together with them intercede for us all.

Kontakion (Tone 1)

The holy branches of noble Sophia, / Faith, Hope, and Love, / confounded Greek sophistry through Grace. / They struggled and won the victory / and have been granted an incorruptible crown by Christ the Master of all.

Ways to Celebrate the Feast of the Elevation of the Cross

1. Have a Cross Scavenger Hunt

Young children love to find things. For this feast you can ask the children to search the house to find all of the crosses that they can. These may include crosses in icons, on the wall, as necklaces, etc. Or, you can buy some cheap small plastic crosses and actually hide them around the house. Give each child a bag, set a timer, and see how many they can find in five minutes. When the timer goes off, bring them all to the couch and tell the story of St. Helen and the finding of the True Cross.

2. Explore Basil

This is a great day to do a scientific exploration of basil. If you have the herb in your garden, you can go out and observe it growing. If not, the whole family can go to the store to purchase some. Have the kids describe its appearance, its smell, its taste, and its texture. You can even let them help you put it into your lunch or dinner that day. While you are examining its scientific properties, be sure to talk about its role in the finding of the Cross and explain its Greek name.

3. Make a Cross

If you are at all crafty (or even if you, like me, are not!), this feast lends itself easily to a craft project. Children can make crosses out of virtually any material. You can use card stock and have children decorate and cut out crosses. Or, many crafting stores have foam paper that would

make lovely crosses. Young children can adorn them with glitter, stickers, beads, or whatever you have on hand. You can even go on a nature walk, gather wildflowers, and glue them on as well.

4. Practice Making the Sign of the Cross

This is also a perfect day to practice making the sign of the cross. With very young children (1-3), hold their hands and physically move them as they practice. You can explain that Orthodox Christians make the sign of the cross to ask for God's blessing and protection and to show our love for Christ.

5. Practice Venerating Crosses

Families can also practice how to venerate crosses, the way to make a bow, and having a reverent attitude when kissing the cross.

6. Read about Christ and the Cross

Finally, read the Gospel of Christ's crucifixion to the children. You can use a children's Bible with illustrations or read from the Bible while the children look at an icon of the crucifixion. The children will likely have many questions about the Cross, about Jesus's death, and even about death itself. This is a fantastic time to talk about Christ's love for humanity and his victory over death.

Caprese Salad Kabobs



TOTAL TIME: 10 min.

YIELD: 12 kabobs.

Ingredients

- 24 grape tomatoes
- 12 cherry-size fresh mozzarella cheese balls
- 24 fresh basil leaves
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 teaspoons balsamic vinegar

Directions

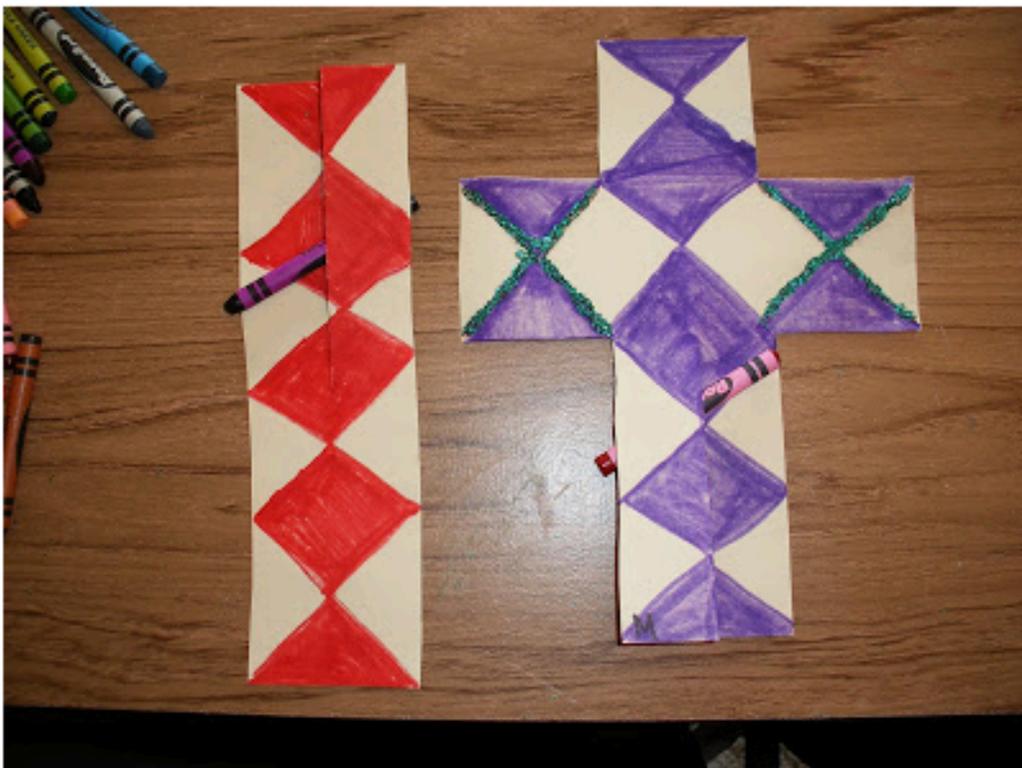
On each of 12 appetizer skewers, alternately thread two tomatoes, one cheese ball and two basil leaves. To serve, whisk together oil and vinegar; drizzle over kabobs.

From: www.tasteofhome.com

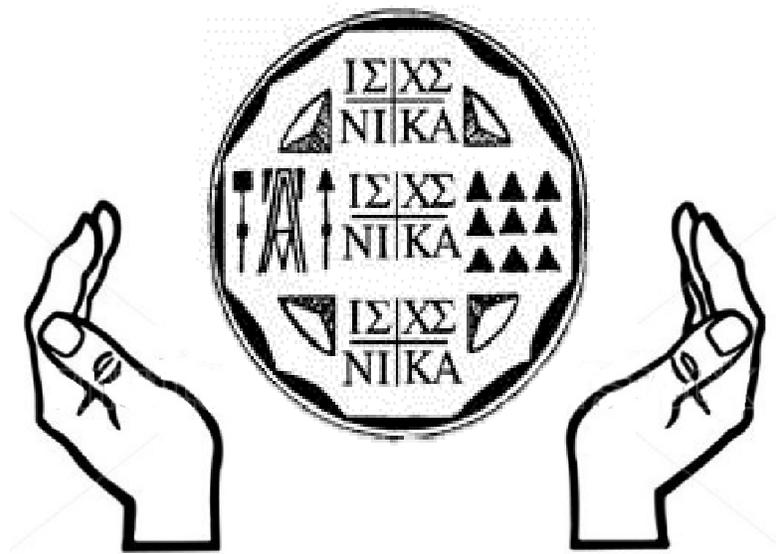
CRAFTS next!



These beautiful stand up crosses are made with cardstock paper (I used folders)

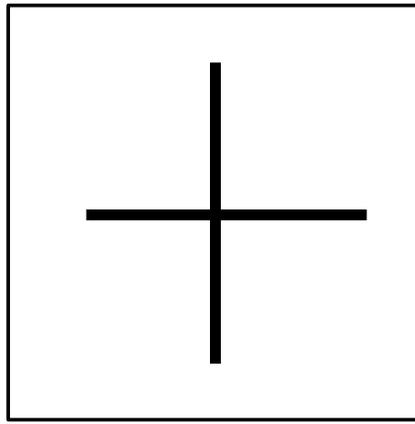
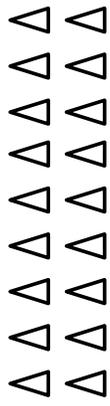
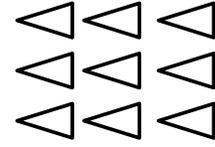
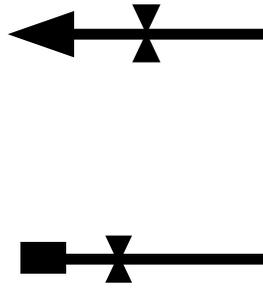


An Orthodox Christian



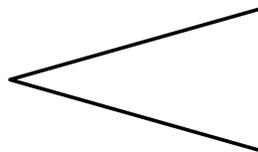
Prosforo Lesson & Puzzle Activity

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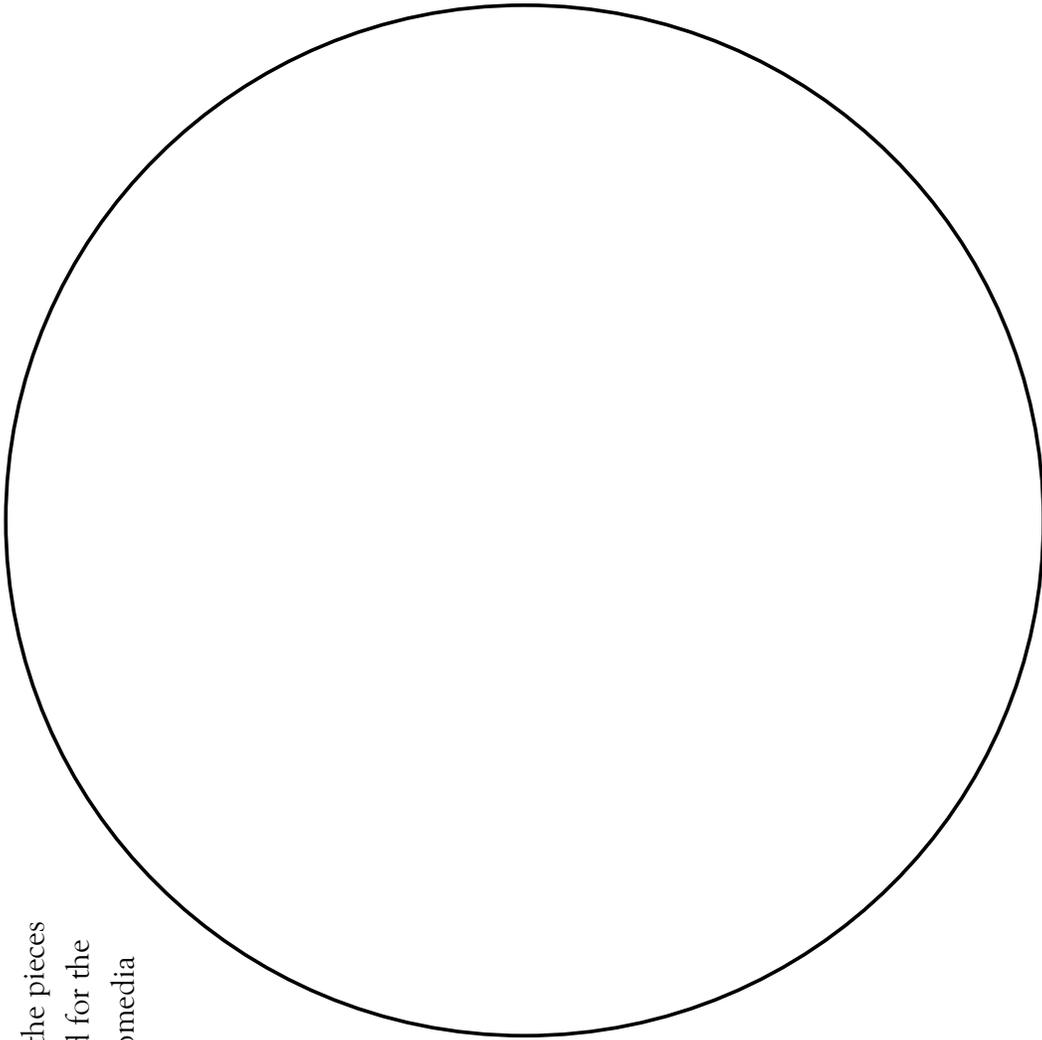


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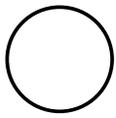
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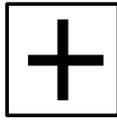
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Arrange the pieces
of bread for the
Proskomedie



The shape of the circle represents the world that God created and everything in it, to where He sent His only begotten Son to save. It is also significant of eternity and never ending life, where we are united to God and to one another, even to those who have reposed along with the Saints of previous generations.



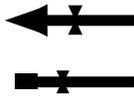
The Cross is sign of Christ's offering of Himself for the life of the world, where He was crucified as the slain lamb which takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). This square will be cut out and lifted up out of the world, "For His Life is removed from the earth."



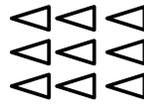
The Greek letters "IC" are synonymous for Jesus, "XC" Christ, "NIKA" conquers, and are cut from the bread and placed around the sign of the Cross as a reminder of who was crucified and why He was crucified. The priest recites, "Divided and distributed is the Lamb of God, who is divided, yet not disunited: who is ever eaten, yet never consumed, but sanctifieth those who partake thereof." This blessing and breaking of bread is significant of what Christ initiated at the Mystical Supper in Mark 14:22.



The largest of the triangles is representative of the holy virgin and mother of God who offered her womb through her free will to bring forth God the Word. This triangle is placed between the following symbols below and reminds us of the hill of Golgotha where Christ was led to be crucified. "At Thy right hand stood the queen, arrayed in vesture wrought of gold and diverse colours" (Psalm XLIV 8:9)



These two shapes are the spear/lance and the staff with a sponge of vinegar. The sponge was used to offer Christ vinegar to drink on the cross, and the spear was used to pierce Christ's side to confirm if He had truly died in the flesh. The priest pierces the bread designated as the "lamb" four times reciting the scriptures.



These nine smaller triangles are used to commemorate St John the Baptist, the prophets, apostles, hierarchs, martyrs, monastic saints, healers, and the whole company of the righteous, with special mention of the saints commemorated on that particular day. When they are placed on the holy diskon with everything else, we are reminded that the Divine Liturgy is being celebrated in heaven at the same time and the angels are in our presence, the invisible and visible united.



The smallest pieces are cut and offered for each person the priest remembers and prays for by name. They may include those living and already reposed, and all will eventually be united into the holy cup to be consecrated and mysteriously changed into our Lord's very own body and blood.

Liturgy – from the Greek work, “liturgia” or the work of the people which is an activity done by hand and can be a labor of love

Eucharist – from the Greek verb “Eucharisto”, to give thanks

Prosforo – from the Greek verb “prosfero” to offer or make an offering

INGREDIENTS:

Wheat – is often symbolic of our human existence, our life. Similarly, the kernels of wheat in the kollyva which are offered at our time of death as the body returns to the earth, must be buried to rise again at the harvest, so too will our bodies and souls, the resurrection.

Bread – Our “daily bread” is a basic substance for life which becomes one with our body. “Besides the cakes, he shall offer for his offering leavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of his peace offerings” (Leviticus 7:13). As mankind, we receive the wheat from God, work with our hands to make flour and with it, bread, which is given back to God for Him to bless, transform into His body to feed the faithful. “Thine own of thine own we offer unto thee in behalf of all and for all.” Christ says “I am the bread of life, he who comes to me shall never hunger...” John 6:35

Salt – as the Scriptures state, that the believers in Christ should be salt to flavor the world, and if it loses its flavor, it has no purpose

Yeast - Christians are called to be yeast in the world, which raises up those around them to co-experience a life in Christ

Warm water - Water is often symbolic for life, for cleansing, and in the Eucharist it is used as the zeal of the Martyrs

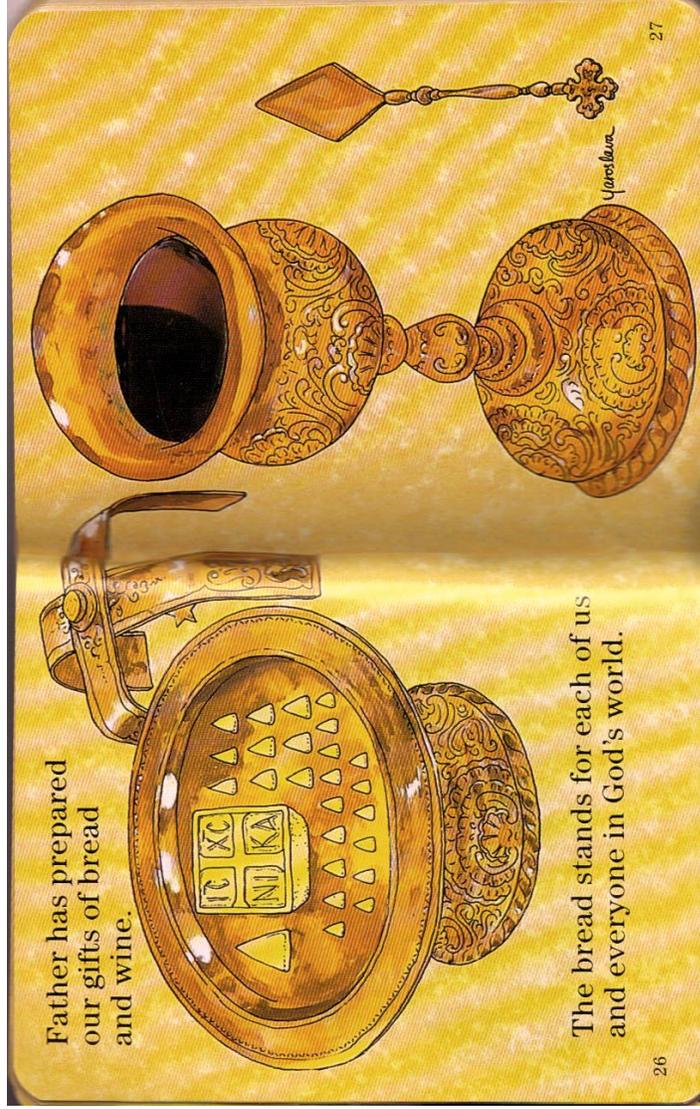
OPENING PRAYER

+ O Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten Son of the Eternal Father, who has said with Thy most pure lips: Without me you can do nothing. With faith I accept your words; help me a sinner, to prepare the Bread of Offering, that the works of my hands may be acceptable at Thy Holy Table and may become through the operation of Thy Holy Spirit the communion of Thy Most Pure Body for me and for all Thy people. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, our God, You sent the heavenly Bread, the food for the whole world, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, as Savior, Redeemer, and Benefactor, to bless us and sanctify us. Do bless this offering and accept it upon Your heavenly altar. As a good and loving God remember those who brought it and those for whom it was brought. Keep us blameless in the celebration of Your divine Mysteries. For sanctified and glorified is Your most honorable and majestic name, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen

This lesson has been prepared by Elenie Grasos at www.orthodoxeducation.blogspot.com Please contact her for questions or comments. © 2012



This image from [Guardian Angel Prayer Book](#) An Introduction to The Divine Liturgy and Prayers for the Young Child by Fr. T. Lozynsky

When Kids Don't Like Church

by Elissa Bjeletich

When we talk about children in the church, we usually mean babies and toddlers — the youngest ones who cannot seem to sit still. That's a big challenge for parents and for the rest of the parish. But what happens when those kids get a little older? We don't talk a lot about what to do when your ten-year old declares that he just doesn't see the point of church or when your eleven-year old says she just doesn't want to go anymore. They'd rather just stay home and pray. God can hear us from here, right? What do you say to that?

I have friends who ask me this question, and they always assume that this isn't a problem I would have, because I write about the faith so obviously my kids must love church! The truth is that every parent — priests, counselors, podcasters and teachers and everyone else — goes through this with their kids. It's a very normal issue. Even kids who really like church and are excited about Jesus will sometimes question whether it's really necessary to go *this week*. Adults go through it too — sometimes we're tired, or just lazy, and we ask ourselves why we drag ourselves to church every Sunday.

It's a good question, and I want to approach it in a few different ways: I want to look at practical things we can do to make going to church regularly a little less painful, and then we'll think about the philosophical answers to the questions the kids are asking. Why do we go church? What are we accomplishing by going that we could not accomplish right here in the comfort of our own homes? Finally, I want to think about this in a larger sense — who are we as parents, and how is it that a child is taught to love God and seek after Him?

Practical Ideas

First, the practical angle. There are certain things that can make these arguments less frequent and easier to win:

— *Get a job.* If your child has a job in the church, like serving at the altar, or ringing the bells, or being an usher or greeter, or singing with the choir, they'll be more likely to want to go to church. Also, when they ask you why you have to go to church today, you can say: Father is expecting you behind the altar, or we need to hear your voice. When your children know that they're valued, active members of the parish, they understand that their presence is helpful and would be missed.

— *Find some friends.* When a child has friends in the parish, going to church means seeing their friends, and people generally like to see their friends. Take them to youth group events. Call that family with the nice kids and invite them over to dinner. Invite church kids to birthday parties. And if your church doesn't have much of a youth group to encourage fellowship and friendship, get to work. Put one together. The more your children see that the church is a loving community, the less difficult it should be to get them there.

— *Know what's happening.* If your church doesn't have pew books, and this goes a hundredfold for those of you whose liturgies happen in languages your children don't understand, go to an Orthodox bookstore online or in person, or go to Amazon or wherever you like, and buy copies of an appropriate liturgy book for your kid.

It really helps if they can follow along. Now, different jurisdictions do things differently, so if you're in a Russian church, find a Russian book, or in a Greek parish find a Greek book. I'm all for being Pan-Orthodox, but be aware that different jurisdictions include and omit different things, and translations vary. Talk with your priest, look around, and try to find something that closely follows what you're actually doing in church. You might also consider an age-appropriate book about the liturgy, something that explains what is happening. Understanding helps. The liturgy becomes more meaningful and relevant to our lives when we know what it is that we're doing.

Be consistent. If you wake up on Sunday mornings and then decide whether the family is going to church or not, you will probably see more resistance than those households who consistently attend church every Sunday. Kids are smart. They know what's negotiable. If you attend church except when you're especially tired or when last night went late or when there's a good soccer game, then your kids know that if they give a good enough reason (or if they cause enough friction) you'll bend and let everyone off the hook. On the other hand, if they know that only category 2+ hurricanes, acts of God, and profound illness will keep you home, they don't argue as much. Oh, they'll still argue sometimes, but the argument will be less frequent and easier to win.

What if they assert their God-given free will to not attend church? What do I say? Try this oldie but goodie: "How you'll manage your relationship with God and the Church over your lifetime is yours, but while you're living in this household, we all go to church." That's a very reasonable response. I have told my children many times that God entrusted me with the sacred and important job of stewarding them to adulthood, and I take it very seriously, and I'm going to do my best. That means that I have chosen to raise them in a church-going family. Their relationship with God is theirs, but the way that the family as a whole relates to God is something for which I will answer on judgment day, so I have to guide everyone as best I can until they come of age and (God willing) leave my home to set up their own.

Philosophical Arguments

Now, I'd like to spend some time thinking about philosophical responses to why we go to church. Kids will often say the same things many adults who stopped attending church say: *God doesn't need me to go to church. I can worship Him anywhere! I'll just worship Him right here on this couch or while I hike on a nice mountaintop. I don't need to worship in a church.*

Let's set aside the obvious problem that when we routinely skip church, we probably aren't spending hours worshipping God in our own unique and solitary way. Odds are, we are watching Netflix or napping or chatting with a friend. We're not actively worshipping all morning.

Philosophically, even if you are actively worshipping God on your couch, it would still be preferable if you could come to the liturgy with the rest of the parish.

While it's true that we can pray anywhere and God can always hear us, there is something special about going to church. We're not a passive audience who simply witnesses a priest worshipping; we are actively doing the work of liturgy. Sometimes we translate *liturgy* as "the work of the people" but I am told that it could be more accurately translated, "the offering of the people for the whole world." Whether it's work or an offering, the people are coming together to do something active that is useful to the whole world.

Every member of the church is equally important. Children are as important as adults; lay people are as important as priests. We all have different roles to fill and different jobs to do, but every member of

This work cannot be done alone. A priest cannot go to the church and simply do the liturgy without another person, because the Eucharist truly is “Communion” — it’s people coming together with one another, with the angels and Saints, and God. Communion cannot happen alone; it requires more than one to come together in love.

When the deacon says, “for peace on earth let us pray to the Lord”, he is not actually praying for peace on earth. He is leading the people, calling them to pray for peace on earth. If you don’t show up and actually pray for peace (saying, “Lord, have mercy” but also we would hope, actually meaning it as a prayer for peace), then the prayer isn’t offered. The people have to be there to offer the prayers — and it’s important that as many people as possible join together in offering up prayers, because *prayer is effective and important*.

When the people gather and sing the hymns and responses of the Church, we join the angels who worship God in song. The angels are performing the liturgy too (we call it *the angelic liturgy*), and we join them in it. If we are not there, we cannot join the angels in liturgy. Prayer at home is different — it is not always accompanied by an invitation to sing with the choir of angels, but every divine liturgy is always an opportunity to enter into this remarkable communion.

When we go to liturgy we are doing the important work of BEING the church.

We are gathering together to witness a miracle — a miracle that is promised to us whenever we gather in this way. In the Eucharist, Christ comes literally into the chalice; Christ comes to us, and we are invited to take Him into ourselves, the we may live in Him and He may live in us. Christ only comes to the chalice if someone joins Father at church; there must be a second person there. And Christ can only come into us through Holy Communion if we are there too — if we stay home, we are not offering ourselves up for transformation and we are not receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. Receiving Holy Communion changes us.

Notably, it wasn’t our idea to gather for liturgy. This is how God arranged things, this is how Christ established Communion at the Last Supper: knowing who we are and how we work, He showed us that in order to receive Him, we have to come together as a body. That’s how we are designed, and how communion works.

I sometimes tell the story about how I was frustrated when I first entered the Church that every time I thought I’d gotten a handle on all of the saints and the books and the ideas, someone would bring up another one I hadn’t heard of. I was so annoyed that I couldn’t know all of it. My priest laughed and said that God designs it this way on purpose: God gives us each a piece of the puzzle because He wants us to gather together to solve it. He is working toward our unity. He calls us to come together on purpose. We have to join together with each other in love as we work to join together with Him in love.

Community is very important. It has been said that ‘One Christian is no Christian’ because it’s only through community, through communion, that we can grow in love and become more like Christ. And that doesn’t just mean that you should hang out with your friends, get a like-minded group together and stay close. Christ calls on us to love our enemies, to sit and break bread with people who are different from us, who make us uncomfortable. The very fact that other people might annoy us, or that going to church means getting out of bed and out of our comfort zone, is actually an integral part of why it’s so important to go to church: we are being called out of ourselves, out of our natural self-centeredness. The only way we can serve Jesus is by serving other people. We can’t wash His feet or feed Him, but when we do this for the least of His sheep, we do it for Him. If we want to find Jesus, we need to look for Him inside other people and find Him there, and serve Him there.

Strangely enough, faith is not a solitary, individual thing. Yes, I have my faith and you have your own; we each have our own relationship with God perhaps, but ultimately, we are called to worship together in love. Christ did not tell us to pray, “My Father, Who art in heaven” but to pray to “Our Father”, together. Further, Christ tells us that where two or more of us are gathered in His Name, He’ll be there. He’ll be present with us — when we gather in holy community, in His Name.

So there really is a difference between being in church and at home; we cannot pray the same way or worship the same way on our couches or on a hiking trail, no matter how breathtaking the mountains are and how inspired we feel. Pray at home and hike as you can, but know that it’s important that you come to church too. One does not replace the other.

Coming together as a community is important in a simpler way as well: we need support and love, and we cannot do that on our own. We need each other.

We could illustrate that with a story that you’ve probably heard before. It can be told in different ways and I don’t know where its true origin lies or who told it first, but it’s a great story and my sister-in-law recently reminded me of it.

A member of a twelve-step program (or perhaps of a church, or of a support group — insert any sweet community who relies on one another), who had been attending meetings regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, his sponsor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening and the sponsor found the sponsee at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.

Guessing the reason for his sponsor’s visit, the sponsee welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. His sponsor made himself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the sponsor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone.

Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The sponsee watched all this in quiet fascination. As the one lone ember’s flame diminished, there was a momentary glow and then it’s fire was no more seen, it was cold and “dead as a doornail.”

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. Just before the sponsor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the sponsor reached the door to leave, the sponsee said, “Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I’ll see you at the meeting in the morning.” — Author Unknown.

We need each other to keep our sparks lit — just like on Pascha when we come outside before midnight. Father brings us the Light of Christ from the altar, and we pass it to one another. We receive that spark in community, one hand to the next, and then we head outside and we face the elements. Some years it’s mild and warm, and other years it’s stormy and cold. Sometimes in life, those winds just blow out our flames, and if we don’t have one another, we cannot relight them. The spark of faith and the spark of hope — these are flames that can be hard to keep lit, and in community, we can help one another keep going.

The Limits of Argument (aka The Hard Part)

As parents who want to raise up children who love God and who love the liturgy, our most powerful weapon is not argument. We can talk for hours about reasons we should go to church, but it’s important to remember that *you can’t argue someone to heaven*. Deeper understanding of what the liturgy means is wonderful, but it’s intellectual. Real faith happens in the heart.

St. Maximos the Confessor said, “Just as the thought of fire does not warm the body, so faith without love does not actualize the light of spiritual knowledge in the soul.”

The thought of fire does not warm my body — it’s true. Knowledge about faith isn’t going to transform our souls unless it’s ignited by a real love for God. What we want for our children is not knowledge about the liturgy, but a love for the liturgy and for Christ. Our real goal is that they love God with all their hearts. We cannot achieve that with argument.

The saints tell us to speak less and to pray more; we should pray for God to kindle love in their hearts, so that they hunger for God each in their own way and pursue Him throughout their lifetimes.

What’s more, research tells us that when children grow up seeing parents who love Christ, whose participation in the life of the Church is fulfilling and fruitful, they tend to follow that example. And when they see parents who don’t really care about liturgy but who just show up at church because that’s the obligation, they take note, and they report that they saw churches that were “shallow” and “insincere”. As always, raising saints turns out to be the hardest job in town, because in order to raise a saint, we’re going to have to become saints.

So I think this may be the place to start: let’s get on our knees and ask God to ignite a great yearning love in our own hearts, and in the hearts of our children. Let’s ask God to grant us the gift of loving Him, of yearning to move closer to Him, so that we can all begin to yearn for liturgy and for the transformative grace of Holy Communion, together.

And then we’ll be patient, and give Him time to work. Remember that our end game is not to have the kids stop complaining by next Sunday; it’s to know that they’ll be reaching out to Christ through the years and into eternity.

We’ll get there.

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