

Prosforo: An Offering of Faith

Of the many ways of supporting our Church, there are few which stand out as uniquely personal offerings of faith. The offering of Prosforo bread for the Divine Liturgy is one of them. The following is an overview of the purpose of Prosforo and some suggestions as to how you and your family can participate in this holy task. I am personally thankful to a handful of ladies who have faithfully fulfilled this responsibility over the years and I invite more of our faithful - especially young families with children - to make this a part of their lives as well.

Introduction

A very meaningful project for the Orthodox Christian family is to bake a loaf of altar bread and bring it to church for the liturgy. The altar bread represents Jesus Who is the Bread of Life. It is baked by someone in the congregation and brought to the priest for each celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

Bread is used not only to represent Jesus Who is the Bread of Life, of which if any man eat he shall never hunger, but also to express the offering of our life to God. The Greek word for Altar bread is prosforo, which means "an offering to God." Bread represents life because it is a staff of life. Once consumed it becomes part of us, i.e., our flesh and bones. Thus, in bringing the loaf of bread to God, we are offering our life to Him as a gift of our love.

The priest accepts the gift and places it on the holy altar. This act represents God accepting our gift. It now passes into His possession. God is so pleased with the gift of our life that He transforms it through the Holy Spirit and gives it back to us as His precious Body for Holy Communion. We give ourselves to God and He, in turn gives Himself to us. We come to the liturgy not just to receive Christ but also to give ourselves to Christ.

An Offering of Great Value

Suppose there is a little girl, say four or five, who sees her father give her mother a birthday present at breakfast. It's Mommy's birthday! Then she too will want to give her mother a birthday present. What can she do? She wanders out into the garden and there the bright yellow glow of a dandelion flower catches her eye. It is only a weed, really: but she does not know that. To her it is a pretty flower. So

she plucks it, toddles into the house and gives it to her mother as a birthday present. The mother, of course, is delighted. Why? Does she want a dandelion? Obviously not for herself it has no value. But it is a gift from her daughter; and because it is a gift it has meaning. It represents the love of that little girl, and that is why it is so precious to the mother. Clearly, then, a gift which is poor in value such as a dandelion can be rich in meaning because of what it expresses and what it means.

And so it is with us and God. We give Him a present. In itself this present consists of a round loaf of bread - a very small value! But because it is a gift, it bears the meaning we put into it. We should, then, make it mean all that we can in the way of praise and love; we should put ourselves into that bread just as the child put herself into the flower. Then it will be precious to God as the flower was to the mother.

Our Offering of Ourselves

That is our part in the sacrifice of the liturgy. When the priest holds up the bread and wine at the altar, he tells God what we intend them to mean. It is not just the priest but everybody in the congregation who is helping to offer the sacrifice through their prayers. We put ourselves into that paten with the Altar Bread, offering to God our mind and heart, our soul and body, all that we have and are. We must, as it were, pour our heart out into the chalice with the wine, and put into it all our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, our love and adoration, our obedience and commitment of our whole self. For all this is to go to God in the shape of a gift. That is our part at this point in the sacrifice: we are to make this offering a part of our lives by offering ourselves.

A Community Work

The word "liturgy" means a community work, something that many people are doing together. That is why all the prayers in the liturgy are in the plural. The priest does not say "I offer this sacrifice to You, Lord...but we..." This means only one thing: the liturgy is something that we do all together -priest and people. During the liturgy we are all offering a sacrifice to God. We are not just watching something being done by the priest at the altar. Nor is it being offered for us even at our request or with our approval, in our presence. We ourselves are offering it. We are sacrificing. We are bringing the bread and wine to God. We are laying our

lives on the altar in complete surrender to God. We are in effect saying to God, "Dear Lord, like the little girl who brought dandelions for her mother's birthday, so I bring you this bread and wine. It is really of no value, Lord, except as a sign signifying that under the symbols of bread and wine I place my whole life on your holy altar because I love you."

Stamped with a Seal

A special seal is stamped on top of the loaf before it is baked. Your priest will know where you can borrow or purchase such a seal. The middle part of the seal contains a square piece of bread with the word ICXC, NIKA. This is a Greek abbreviation for "Jesus Christ Conquers." Since this is the piece that will be changed into the Body of Christ, it is called the Lamb of God. A large triangular piece is removed from the left of the Lamb of God and placed on the paten. This represents the Virgin Mary, our Lord's mother. Then nine smaller triangular pieces are removed from the seal to commemorate the angels, prophets, apostles and saints of the Church. These are placed on the platen to the right of the Lamb of God. Following this, the priest prays for the living members of the congregation especially for those whose names have been submitted to him. As he prays for each name he cuts a small piece of bread representing the person prayed for, and places it immediately below Jesus, the Lamb of God. Finally, he removes a piece of bread for each deceased person for whom we have requested prayers. Thus, around the Lamb of God on the paten is gathered the entire Church consisting of the angels, saints and loved ones in heaven together with members of the local congregation. All are alive in God's presence and all constitute the one living Body of Christ.

Since the loaf represents us, it is recommended that the family submit a list of names to the priest when presenting the loaf. One column should be entitled "Living," containing the names of members of the Orthodox Christians who you wish to have remembered in prayer. A second column should be entitled "Departed," under which may be listed the names of departed Orthodox Christians to be commemorated.

A Prayer of Offering

After the bread has been baked, the following prayer may be said in unison by the family:

"Dear Lord, this bread that we have baked represents each one of us in this family and in our congregation. We are offering ourselves to You, our very life, in humble obedience and total commitment to You. Accept our gift and make us worthy to receive the greater Gift that You will give us when You consecrate this bread and give it back to us as Your Precious Body. Amen."

We Are On the Altar

By baking the altar bread and bringing it to church, we come to realize that we are not only at the altar but "on" the altar in every liturgy. The bread and wine which the priest places on the altar have been put there with prayers in remembrance of us.

When the priest elevates the bread and wine (chalice and paten) at the altar, we remember that these are our gifts the priest is offering to God: our love, our thanksgiving, our obedience, our life. We remember that we are symbolically on the altar offering ourselves to God, but Jesus Christ is actually present through the reality of these gifts becoming the true Body and Blood of Christ at the consecration.

- *Text is by Father Anthony Coniaris with editions by Father John Touloumes and Father Peter Orfanakos*

On Preparing Prosforo Bread for the Divine Liturgy

Prosforon Recipe

Ingredients:

2 tsp yeast (1 pkg)

1 tsp sugar

¼ cup warm water

5 cups pre-sifted, unbleached flour (King Arthur preferred)

1 tsp salt

1 ½ cup warm water

Procedure:

Place yeast and sugar in a small bowl. Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup warm water and whisk to mix well. Cover with plastic wrap to allow yeast to rise for approximately 10 minutes. Place flour and salt in a mixing bowl, add yeast, add $1\frac{1}{2}$ cup warm water slowly mixing to form dough. Dough should be soft but not sticky. Place dough on floured surface and knead to make a smooth round ball. Place in pan and press down. Sprinkle flour on a clean, dry surface and press with seal to make an imprint on the dough. Remove seal carefully keeping seal in tact. Bake in 350 degree oven for approximately 45 minutes. While baking 20 minutes spray bread with water and allow to continue baking.

Prepare a list of names of Orthodox Christians who you would like commemorated in the service. Use first names only. On the left side, write "Living" at the top and list the names below. On the right side, write "Departed" and write the names of departed below. Bring the list and the bread to the Church before the start of Orthros (or the day before).

Note: It is traditional to have an icon and a lighted candle in the area where the Prosforo is being prepared, as it is an offering of faith. The Jesus Prayer may be used during the preparation.

- *Presbytera Marinda is grateful to Fr. Anthony Coniaris of blessed memory and to Fr. John Touloumes and Fr. Peter Orfanakos for this article, reprinted from St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Orange, CT*