

## Orders for the Blessing of Various Objects. Molebens and Akathists

DIFFERENT EDITIONS of the Book of Needs contain numerous rites for blessing different objects, molebens (services of supplication, called in Greek a *paraklēsis* service) for various occasions,<sup>1</sup> and akathists. A complete review of this broad range of material would be impracticable, the more so since the content of the Book of Needs varies depending on the time and place of publication. In the seventeenth century Metropolitan Peter Mogila of Kiev appears to have collected all the rites known in his day, and also to have compiled several new ones, which he included in his own Book of Needs, published in 1646. Many of the prayers included in this collection later fell into disuse. At the same time, throughout the entire period from the mid-seventeenth century to the present, new rites, molebens, and prayers have continued to be created. In the overview below we will examine only a few service orders in the Book of Needs that remain currently in use.<sup>2</sup>

### The Blessing of Liturgical Implements and Icons

Liturgical implements are blessed by reading special prayers and sprinkling them with holy water. For the blessing of a full set of liturgical vessels (the diskos, chalice, star, spoon, and three coverings) the *order for the blessing and sanctification of liturgical vessels* is used. This consists of the usual beginning, Psalm 23, two prayers, and sprinkling the vessels with holy water. A similar rite is used for blessing each of these liturgical vessels individually, but there is a different prayer for each. There is also the *order for the blessing of new church vessels*, used for blessing items used at the divine services (the censer, water vessels, and other altar appurtenances). For blessing the eileton—the cloth in which the antimension is wrapped—the *order for the blessing of the eileton* is

used. Priestly vestments are blessed using the *order for the blessing or sanctification of new priestly vestments*, and hangings for the holy table are blessed using the *order for the blessing of the endyte*. Each of these rites includes the usual beginning, a psalm, two prayers, and a sprinkling with holy water with the words, “This (*name of the item*) is blessed by the grace of the All-holy Spirit through the sprinkling of this holy water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The *order for the blessing of a newly fashioned cross* is of greater length. It includes the usual beginning and three psalms (131, 59, and 98); the troparion to the cross is sung; the priest reads two prayers of blessing; the cross is sprinkled with holy water; stichera to the cross are sung; and the clergy and people bow down before the cross and kiss it. In the first prayer the priest asks God to send down his blessing upon the newly fashioned cross, and to bless and sanctify it, filling it with the power and blessing of the wood to which the most pure body of the Lord Jesus Christ was nailed. The context of this prayer and those that follow shows that the service order clearly pertains to a cross of large proportions, made to be venerated by the faithful. For the blessing of a small baptismal cross the *order for the blessing of a cross to be worn on the breast* is used.<sup>3</sup>

As has already been noted,<sup>4</sup> in the ancient Church there was no special order for the blessing for icons. In Byzantium it was the custom to anoint a newly painted icon with holy chrism. Today an icon is blessed by sprinkling it with holy water and reading special prayers. The order for the blessing of any given icon includes the usual beginning, the reading of a psalm and of two prayers, and the sprinkling of the icon with holy water.





*The blessing of an icon*

For blessing icons of the Holy Trinity there is the *order for the blessing of icons of the Most Holy Life-giving Trinity in images of the three angels, or of the Baptism, or of the Transfiguration, or of the descent of the Holy Spirit*. The very name of the rite indicates which particular icons may be considered images of the Trinity: symbolic depictions of the three persons of the Godhead in the form of the three angels (as in the icon by Andrei Rublev) and icons of the feasts of the Baptism of our Lord, Transfiguration, and Pentecost. The link between these events is discernible in this prayer from the service:

O Lord God, Who art glorified in the Holy Trinity . . . as the Old Testament telleth us of Thine appearing in the image of the three angels to the most-glorious Patriarch Abraham, so too in the New, in a voice the Father bestowed grace upon the Son in the flesh in the Jordan, and the Holy Spirit was revealed in the form of a dove. And again, the Son Who ascended in the flesh to Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, sent down the Comforter, the Spirit, in the form of fiery tongues upon the apostles; and on Tabor, the Father in a voice, the Holy Spirit in a cloud, and the Son in truly-bright light, showed themselves to the three Disciples. Thus, as an everlasting remembrance, we confess

Thee, God Who alone is glorified, not just with our mouths, but we paint an image, not to make this a god, but that when we gaze upon it with our fleshly eyes, we might see Thee, our God, in our minds.

In all four types of icons of the Holy Trinity mentioned in the order for their blessing, God the Father is not depicted. The Holy Spirit is depicted in the icon of Theophany in the form of a dove, and in the icon of Pentecost, in the form of rays and tongues of fire resting on the heads of the apostles; in the icon of the Transfiguration, as follows from the prayer, the presence of the Holy Spirit is symbolized by the cloud. This rite may not be used for blessing any icons of the Holy Trinity in which God the Father or the Holy Spirit is depicted in the form of a dove outside the context of the Theophany of our Lord (such as the “New Testament Trinity,” the “Paternity,” etc.). These icons are not eligible to be blessed or to be in church at all, since they violate the strict prohibition against all depictions of God the Father.<sup>5</sup>

For blessing icons of the Savior or a feast of the Lord a corresponding rite is used, which includes a prayer briefly outlining the theological basis of iconography and mentions the account of the Mandylion (the “Icon Not Made By Hands”), sent by Christ to Abgar of Edessa. Separate rites exist for blessing icons of the Mother of God, a saint or group of saints, and for “various icons.” A special rite is used for blessing a reliquary in which holy relics are kept. Certain editions of the Book of Needs also include an *order for the blessing and sanctification of an iconostasis*.

### **Molebens for Various Occasions**

In the Orthodox Church there are a large number of molebens, hymns, and prayers for various occasions.

The *moleben for the New Year* is served on the eve of the New Year according to the civil calendar.<sup>6</sup> This is at once a service of thanksgiving and of supplication. It begins with the exclamation from the liturgy, “Blessed is the kingdom,” and includes the reading of Psalm 64, the great litany with special petitions “that He will bless the beginning and continuance of this year,” the singing of troparia



of thanksgiving, readings from the epistles (1 Tim 2.1–6) and the Gospel (Lk 4.16–22), the augmented litany with additional petitions of thanksgiving, a prayer of thanksgiving read by the priest, the singing of the great doxology, and the dismissal. Sometimes in place of the great doxology the early Christian hymn “We praise Thee, O God,” attributed to St Ambrose of Milan, is sung.

The *moleben for the beginning of the instruction of children* is served as a rule at or before the beginning of the school academic year (in Russia, on September 1 N.S.) The service order contains special petitions that God “will send down upon these children the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and will enlighten their minds and lips, and enlighten their hearts, unto the receiving of precepts of good instruction.”

The *moleben for the sick, whether one or many*, is served for those who are gravely ill. The rite contains prayers for the healing of illnesses and that the souls and bodies of the sick may be cured, and that their transgressions may be forgiven, both voluntary and involuntary. Certain prayers are taken from the service order of the sacrament of unction (in particular the prayer “O Physician of souls and bodies”).

The *moleben of thanksgiving for the receiving of a petition and for every good gift from God* is usually called the thanksgiving moleben. It is served at the request of a believer who wishes to give special thanks to God for a benefaction he has been granted or for deliverance from danger, illness, or affliction. The moleben includes the singing of the troparia of thanksgiving (“We, Thine unworthy servants, O Lord, grateful for Thy great benefits given unto us”), readings from the epistles (Eph 5.8–21) and the Gospel (Lk 17.12–19), a litany with special petitions, a final prayer of thanksgiving, and the hymn “We praise Thee, O God.”

Special molebens are served in times of natural disasters—*want of rain (drought), inclement weather* (prolonged heavy rain), *earthquake, flood,*<sup>7</sup> and *devastating epidemic and ruinous pestilence*.

Several services in the Book of Needs have to do with war and military action. The Orthodox Church has never taken a position of absolute pacifism, and it has always blessed soldiers to do battle with foreign foes, offering up prayers for victory over enemies

in times of war. In Russia in wartime it was customary to serve the *moleben sung in time of war against adversaries*. There is also an *order for the blessing of a military standard, or banner, and for the blessing of soldiers for battle*, which includes sprinkling the standards, soldiers, and officers with holy water and blessing the warriors to do battle. Certain modern editions of the Book of Needs also include the *order for the blessing military weapons*, which includes the prayer, “O Lord our God . . . send down Thy heavenly blessing upon these weapons, and grant strength and might to this Thy servant *N.* to bear them unto the fortification and defense of Thy Holy Church, of orphans and widows, and of those on earth who desire Thy holy inheritance.” According to the directions in the Book of Needs, during the reading of this prayer the weapons are placed on a special table before the ambon. Following the prayer they are sprinkled with holy water. For the blessing of a battleship there is the *order for the blessing of a battleship being launched against the foe*.

The Church accompanies those departing on a long journey with special prayers: for this the Book of Needs contains the *order of blessing for a journey* and the *order of blessing for them that are about to travel by water*. A ship is blessed using a separate rite, for which there is the *order for the blessing of a new ship or boat*. In the twentieth century these service orders were supplemented by the *order for the blessing of a chariot* (that is, a motor vehicle), the *order for the blessing of an airship* (an airplane), and the *order for the blessing of a journey by air*.

For blessing houses, private apartments, and office spaces the *order for the blessing of a new home*, included in certain editions of the Book of Needs, is used. It includes the usual beginning and Psalm 90, after reading which the priest prays that the Lord may bless the home and its inhabitants and preserve it unharmed by adversaries. Then the priest blesses oil, sprinkles all the walls of the home with holy water, and anoints the four walls of the house or apartment with the oil. After this the Gospel account of Zacchaeus the Publican (Lk 19.1–10) and Psalm 100 may be read. The rite ends with the augmented litany, the dismissal, and the polychronion.



For the blessing of a cemetery there is an *order for the blessing and sanctification of the place where the bodies of Christians who have reposed will be buried*. Certain editions of the Book of Needs likewise include the *order of the blessing and sanctification of the cross over a grave*.

The digging of a well is accompanied by two service orders: at the beginning the *order of prayer at the digging of a well and the finding of water* is served; at the end, the *order of the blessing of a new well*.

The Great Book of Needs includes a rite called the *order of supplication for the infirm who are beset by unclean spirits*. This rite contains several psalms, the “canon of supplication to our Lord Jesus Christ, to the Most Holy Theotokos, to the bodiless hosts, to the apostles, and to all the saints,” a litany, the prayer for one who is ailing from the sacrament of unction, and five prayers of exorcism ascribed to Basil the Great. These prayers, translated from the Greek, originate from the early Christian practice of exorcism—driving demons out of those possessed by them. Today Basil the Great’s prayers of exorcism are used by a few solitary spiritual fathers, about whom congregate those who are possessed or believe themselves to be so: the reading of the prayers is made into a ritual (in the vernacular called *otchitivanie* or *otchitka*—a “reading out” of the evil spirit), during which those possessed throw themselves on the floor, scream in inhuman voices, froth at the mouth, etc. Extreme caution must be exercised in assessing these phenomena, since at times psychological disorders or abnormal behavior can be mistaken for demonic possession. And if a person is psychologically unstable, being present at this kind of ritual is by no means conducive to his recovery.

### **Molebens and Akathists. Worship According to and Outside the Typicon**

The molebens and other prayers included in the various editions of the Book of Needs comprise service orders for special occasions in addition to the daily cycle of services, or else for particular needs related to various circumstances in the life of a Christian. For many

centuries the prayer life of a Christian in the Church revolved around the Eucharist and participation in the services of the daily cycle, which are regulated by the Typicon. There were no “private” services for individual needs, served at the particular request of a believer. Only in extraordinary cases were prayer services conducted outside those prescribed by the church Typicon.

Over the last two centuries, however, the practice of performing various service orders for individual needs—“customized” divine services—has become widespread in the Russian Orthodox Church. Not content, so to speak, with public worship, the modern parishioner can request a special service for himself, which the priest serves following the liturgy or the all-night vigil. Private services have become a regular custom in most churches—a sort of separate liturgical cycle, existing alongside what is prescribed by the Typicon, but unregulated by any rules or regulations.

Molebens in particular are served in most churches on a regular, often daily basis. In many churches a moleben is served after every liturgy. In these cases the so-called *general moleben* is used as a basis. Paradoxically, the order of the general moleben is not found in most editions of the Book of Needs. The reason for this is that the moleben is not a standalone service, but rather a greatly abbreviated and significantly altered matins service.<sup>8</sup> In compiling molebens, parish rectors usually follow an oral tradition. The moleben may be dedicated to the Savior, the Mother of God, one of the icons of the Mother of God, or saints (one or several). Composite molebens—for example, to the Savior, the Mother of God, and several (if not several dozen) saints—are also widespread.

The moleben begins with the exclamation “Blessed is our God,” the singing of “O Heavenly King,” the reading of the trisagion prayers, and Psalm 142. Then the great litany is intoned, followed by the singing of “God is the Lord” and troparia to those to whom the moleben is dedicated (in the case of a “composite moleben” there may be several—or several dozen—such troparia). The troparia are followed by Psalm 50. At the moleben a canon to the saint or saints may be chanted; in practice, however, the canon is replaced by brief refrains: “O Sweetest Jesus, save us”; “O Most Holy Theotokos, save us”, “Holy Hierarch Father Nicholas, pray unto God

for us”; etc. Each refrain is sung by the clergy, then repeated by the choir (they are repeated to correspond to each of the odes in the canon, though the text of the canon is omitted). The refrains are interspersed with troparia, kontakia, and litanies. A prokeimenon and a Gospel reading are also inserted (the Gospel reading depends on the whom the moleben calls upon). After the completion of the refrains, “It is truly meet” is sung, followed by an augmented litany commemorating the names, with various additional petitions.

At the end of the moleben a special prayer is read, after which the dismissal is given. There are various abbreviated forms of the moleben: the usual beginning is omitted, the psalms are omitted, the refrains are sung only three times, the refrains are not sung at all, the Gospel is omitted, etc.

In many parishes and monasteries a *moleben with an akathist* may also be served. Here the akathist—to the Savior, the Mother of God, in honor of one of the icons of the Mother of God, or to a saint—is inserted after the first six repetitions of the refrains, before the reading of the Gospel. Some parishes and monasteries have a practice of combining molebens with akathists made up of several different akathists: the first ikos and kontakion may be taken, for example, from the akathist to Sweetest Jesus; the second ikos and kontakion, from the akathist to the Theotokos; the third, from the akathist to John the Forerunner; the fourth, to St Nicholas; etc. This kind of creative liturgics has no basis in the church Typicon, and is not found in a single liturgical book or a single edition of the Book of Needs.

With regard to the widespread usage of molebens and akathists the following should be noted. The practice of serving molebens and akathists everywhere and every day has become widespread in the Russian Church over the last hundred and fifty to two hundred years. Unlike hard-to-grasp Byzantine hymns, the texts used at molebens and akathists require neither any particular intellectual effort nor any special theological training to understand: they are simple in content and easy to digest. These factors are largely responsible for their popularity among the laity.

A moleben is essentially a matins service that has been stripped of all the texts that are hardest to understand. For whereas the

matins elements richest in theology are the stichera and the canons, at the moleben stichera generally are not sung at all, and of the canon only the refrains remain. The almost universal proliferation of molebens in the Russian Church is a sign that the development of liturgical piety has been following a trajectory of semantic simplification, replacing the more ancient, lengthy, and complex texts with those that are simpler, shorter, and easier to understand.

Similar processes have occurred in various eras in Protestantism and Catholicism, in which the ancient, theologically rich liturgical texts were replaced with chorales and canticles. In the Catholic Church the final stage of combining and simplifying liturgical ritual was the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. In Protestantism an analogous reform took place at the moment of its inception. In both cases richness of theological content was sacrificed in the name of making the divine services understandable and accessible. To a significant degree, however, their divine services ceased to be a school of theology and religious thought, and are now at best no more than a school of piety.

The widespread proliferation of akathists is also linked to a waning interest in the liturgy and the other appointed services. Only one akathist is known to the Orthodox Typicon—the one sung on Saturday of the fifth week of Great Lent. Other excellent akathists were later patterned after this akathist for home use, such as those to Sweetest Jesus and to St Nicholas. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, numerous akathists were composed to various saints or individual icons of the Mother of God. Some of these are composed on a subpar theological and literary level, replacing theology with piety, and religious thought with mere religious talk.

Among the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church certain voices are heard calling for reform in Orthodox worship, to make the divine services easier to understand. But if understandability in the services is achieved at the cost of subsequently eliminating the prescribed liturgical texts from use and replacing them with “folk hymnography,” such a reform is unlikely to bear good fruit.



This discussion must, in all likelihood, take place in the context not so much of “reforming” the divine services as of returning them to the sphere of the church Typicon, so that the believer might regain access to the treasury of Orthodox theology and religious thought contained in these prescribed liturgical texts. First and foremost, efforts must be made to ensure that the divine liturgy once again assumes the sole and central place that rightfully belongs to it—and to it alone—in the consciousness of Orthodox Christians.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Services of supplication, either public or private, for various occasions.—*Trans.*

<sup>2</sup>In compiling this overview we employed the following: *Trebnik* [The Book of Needs] (St. Petersburg: 1995)—a reprint of the *Bolshoi Trebnik* [The Great Book of Needs] (Moscow: 1884); *Trebnik v trekh chastyakh* [The Book of Needs in Three Parts] (Kiev: 1996); *Posledovanie molebnikh peniy* [The Order of Hymns of Supplication] (Trinity-Sergius Lavra: 2003); and *Trebnik. Chinoposledovanie iz Velikago Trebnika, iz knigi molebnikh peniy i inyya* [The Book of Needs: Service Orders from the Great Book of Needs, from the Book of Supplicatory Hymns and Others] (Vladimirova [Slovenia]: 1944). All these publications differ substantially from each other in volume and in the number of service orders included.

<sup>3</sup>The order for the blessing of a cross raises a theological problem, to which the Book of Needs gives no direct answer. The problem is this: in the ancient Church

a cross was perceived as a source of sanctification and sanctity regardless of whether or not it had been blessed. The special order for the blessing of a cross is of later origin, and was unknown in the ancient Church. In modern practice the cross is blessed by sprinkling it with holy water, but the water itself is blessed through immersion of the cross into it. It therefore remains unclear which of these is the source of sanctification: the cross or the holy water?

<sup>4</sup>See p. 272 of this volume.

<sup>5</sup>See Steven Bigham, *The Image of God the Father in Orthodox Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995).—*Ed.*

<sup>6</sup>In the Russian Church some priests serve this moleben on the eve of September 1 Old Style (September 14 New Style), when the “Beginning of the Indiction” or church New Year is celebrated. Others serve it on the eve of the “Old New Year” (January 1 O.S., January 14 N.S.). The most widespread practice in recent decades, however, has been to serve this moleben on the eve of the civil New Year (New Style)—that is, on the eve of December 31.

<sup>7</sup>The order of the moleben in time of flood was first served on November 14, 1824, in the Kazan Cathedral in Saint Petersburg, on the seventh day of the most catastrophic flood in the history of the northern capital, when nearly the entire city was inundated, houses were destroyed, and many people perished.

<sup>8</sup>The description that follows below corresponds to the Russian practice. The Greek *paraklēsis* service is related, but quite different. It is an abbreviated matins service, but still contains a full canon, which is sung according to traditional melodies (in contrast, Russian canons are never composed in poetic meter to match a melody, see Vol. 4, p. 93). In Greek practice, the Great and Small Paraklēsis to the Theotokos are chanted on alternating evenings in the Dormition Fast, and general in times of peril, hardship, temptation, or suffering.—*Ed.*