

The Consecration of a Church

IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH there are several service orders related to the construction of a new church: the order used at the founding of a church, the order for placing a cross on the cupola of a church, the order for the blessing of a bell tower, and the dedication (consecration) of a church. In addition there is a lesser blessing of a church, served after the renovation of a previously consecrated church, if the altar was not moved in the process of renovation. The consecration of the antimimension usually takes place at the same time as the consecration of the church, but it may also be served as a separate order. The orders for the blessing of various liturgical items and icons may also be served separately.

The orders for the founding and consecration of a church are of very ancient origin. Already in the late eighth century the *Barberini Euchologion* included a prayer at the founding of a church, an order for the blessing of a newly erected church, and an order for installing holy relics therein (later manuscripts combined these two rites into one). A detailed description of the order for the consecration of a church is found in the writings of Symeon of Thessalonica, and its primary features remain unchanged to this day.¹

The Founding of a Church



St Peter laying the foundation of Holy Dormition Cathedral. Marginal scene from a hagiographical icon. Late 16th–early 17th c.

The Slavonic Book of Needs contains two forms of *the order of the founding of a church*—a short form and an extended form. The short order² is served by a bishop vested in the omophorion and epitrachelion. The order begins, as usual, with the trisagion prayers, after which the troparion is sung to the saint in whose honor the church is to be erected, “and other troparia that the rector desires.” A prayer is then read in which the bishop asks God to preserve the foundations of the church “unbreakable and unshaken.” A dismissal follows, after which the bishop takes a stone and, tracing a cross with it, places it at the foundation of the church with these words: “The Most High hath hallowed His tabernacle. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be shaken; God shall help her right early in the morning” (Ps 45.6). At the place where the holy altar will be located the bishop erects a cross, saying a prayer in which he asks God to bless and sanctify this site for the church. The cross is inscribed with the date of the founding of the church.

A more complete service order, found in the Supplementary Book of Needs,³ calls for the participation of a bishop in full vestments (sakkos, omophorion, and miter). During the usual beginning the bishop censes the Gospel, located in the center, and all the excavations dug for the foundation (the censuring is made in a counterclockwise circle starting at the first wall of the altar. After Psalm 142 the great litany is intoned, with special petitions added for the founding of a church. Following the exclamation, “God is the Lord” and the troparia are sung, including a special troparion for the founding of a church. Next Psalm 50 is read, during which water and oil are brought. This is followed by prayers for the blessing of the water and oil and a prayer at the erecting of a cross. The bishop and the priests erect the cross, after which they approach the excavation, where a stone lies that will be laid as part of the foundation of the church. The bishop reads a prayer over the stone, sprinkles it with holy water, and places it on the prepared site with the words, “This church is founded to the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, in honor and memory of *N.* [the name of the feast or the name of the saint], in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” As the bishop pours the

holy oil upon the stone he says, “Blessed and illustrious be this place for house of prayer, to the honor and glory of God, glorified in the Holy Trinity.” The conclusion of the order includes a litany, with petitions for the founders of the church, and a dismissal.

If a wooden church is being blessed, the bishop takes an axe and strikes the middle altar log three times with the words, “This work is begun in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in the honor and memory of *N.*” Then the bishop goes around all four sides of the foundation, sprinkling the logs, and on each side he strikes a log three times. At this time Psalms 86, 126, 121, and 131 are read.

Certain editions of the Book of Needs contain special service orders for erecting a cross on the cupola of the newly built church and for the blessing of a bell tower.

The Consecration of a Church and of an Antimension

The *order of the dedication (consecration) of a church*⁴ takes place after the work of construction is completed. This order is served by a bishop, and only under exceptional circumstances may it be served by a priest (in which case several prayers are omitted). The order of the dedication of a church revolves around two key concepts: the first pertains to the church proper as the house of God, the receptacle of divine grace, while the second pertains to the relics of the martyr or saint that are placed at the base of the holy table. The meaning of the Christian church building, its symbolism, and its Old Testament prefigurations have already been discussed in fair detail above.⁵ The significance of the martyrs for the Christian Church has also been mentioned on numerous occasions in this book.⁶

The order for the blessing of a church includes sacred rituals reminiscent of the sacraments of baptism, chrismation, and holy orders: here too water and chrism are used, the clergy vest in white vestments, and there is a circular procession. The purpose of all these sacred rituals is that the church, built of stone or wood by human hands, might acquire a spirit of life, becoming a receptacle of holy things, a house of the Living God.⁷

On the eve of the consecration of the church the all-night vigil is served with the royal doors closed and the curtain drawn. A holy table, hangings for the holy table and the table of oblation, an eileton (a square cloth), an antimension, rose water, wine, holy chrism, and a number of other items must be prepared in advance of the consecration. Before the bishop arrives, wax-mastic is prepared—a compound of melted wax, mastic, aloe, frankincense, and benzoin.



His Holiness the Patriarch signing the antimension for a church

The consecration of the church takes place before the beginning of the liturgy. The bishop vests in full hierarchal vestments, over which he dons an apron and sleeve protectors. Aprons and sleeve protectors are likewise donned by the concelebrating priests. Then the bishop enters the altar with the other clergy: all laymen and altar servers leave the altar, and the royal doors are closed. Holy water is brought, and with it the bishop sprinkles the four corners of the holy table. Then boiling wax-mastic is brought: the bishop pours it on the pillars of the holy table and once again sprinkles the holy table with holy water. The prayer before the consecration of a church is read, after which the priests bring the board that will become the top of the holy table. The bishop sprinkles it with holy water on both sides, and it is placed on the four pillars of the

holy table, to the reading of Psalm 144. Next Psalm 22 is read, after which the priests use stones, prepared beforehand, to drive nails into the corners of the top of the holy table. The royal doors are opened, the bishop goes out onto the ambon, and kneeling down he reads a prayer in which, recalling how King Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he asks God to send down the Holy Spirit upon the newly erected church, and prays that this church be preserved unto the end of the age. Then the great litany is intoned, ending with the words, “For holy art thou, O our God, who retest upon the precious martyrs who have suffered for thee. . . .”

The bishop then reenters the altar, and the royal doors are closed. Warm water, wine, and rose water are brought. The bishop reads a prayer for the blessing of the water, and the water is mixed with the wine and rose water, after which the mixture is poured upon the table, and the priests wipe the table with special cloths as Psalm 83 is read. Following the words, “Glory to our God unto the ages of ages,” the bishop sprinkles the antimimension with the same mixture. Verses from Psalm 50 are read, and the clergy wipe the holy table with sponges. The bishop says, “Blessed is our God,” and anoints the holy table crosswise with holy chrism: crosses are traced in three places on the board forming the top of the holy table, and on each of the four pillars of the holy table. The antimimension is also cruciformly anointed with chrism in three places. The choir sings Psalm 132, after which the bishop exclaims, “Glory to thee, O Holy Trinity our God, unto the ages of ages.” The reading of Psalm 131 begins, during which the holy table is covered with the *srachitsa*, or shroud⁸ (a cubical altar covering), and tied with cord in such a way that a cross is formed on each side of the holy table. Then the holy table is covered with the *inditia*⁹ (the outer altar covering, also cubical). Psalm 92 is read, after which the bishop exclaims, “Blessed is our God,” and the table of oblation is covered. The royal doors are then opened; the bishop removes the apron and sleeve protectors and censes the altar and the entire church to the singing of Psalm 25. The bishop is accompanied by the priests, one of whom sprinkles the walls of the church with holy water, while another anoints the walls with holy chrism, using a brush attached to a long pole.

Upon returning to the altar, the bishop stands before the holy table and reads a prayer in which he recalls the sending down of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, and asks God to fill the newly built church with his glory, that the bloodless sacrifice might be accomplished in it. After the exclamation “Peace be unto all,” the following prayer is read:

We thank Thee, O Lord God of Hosts, for as Thou hast poured out grace on Thy Holy Apostles, and on our Venerable Fathers, so Thou hast vouchsafed to extend this even unto us sinners, Thine unworthy servants, for the sake of Thy great love for mankind. Therefore, we pray Thee, O Most-merciful Master: Do Thou fill with glory, and holiness, and grace, this Altar, that the Bloodless Sacrifices which shall be offered on it may be transformed into the Most-pure Body and Precious Blood of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, Thine Only-begotten Son, unto the salvation of all Thy people and of us, who are unworthy.

After reading this prayer the bishops lights a candle and places it at the high place behind the holy table (up to this moment no lamps have been lit in the altar), takes the Gospel and a cross and gives them to the priests, and distributes lighted candles to the rest of the serving clergy. After the bishop’s exclamation, “Let us depart in peace,” they leave the church in solemn procession. According to the Typicon they are to go to a neighboring church, where a piece of the relics of a martyr or other saint lie prepared, which are to be brought to the newly built church. At this time troparia to the martyrs are sung:

As with fine purple linen, Thy Church hath been adorned with the blood of Thy Martyrs throughout the world, O Christ our God. Therefore, she crieth out to Thee: Send down Thy mercies to Thy people, give peace to Thy habitation and to our souls great mercy.

The universe offereth the God-bearing Martyrs as the first-fruits of nature, to Thee, O Lord the Gardener of Creation. Through the

Theotokos and their prayers preserve Thy Church—Thy habitation—in profound peace, O Greatly-merciful One.

Upon arriving at the neighboring church, the bishop enters the altar and reads a prayer, asking God to vouchsafe the faithful to be imitators of the holy martyrs and sharers in their inheritance. The bishop censes the relics, then takes them up, lifts them over his head, and carries them thus to the newly built church. Two priests support the bishop's arms, and two or four subdeacons shade the bishop with fans, while two others carry the dikerion and trikerion. Before entering the newly built church the troparia "O holy martyrs" and "Glory to thee, O Christ God," from the order of holy matrimony and ordination, are sung.

Such are the directions for processing with the relics in the church Typicon, as reflected in the Book of Needs and the Hierarchal Service Book. In practice, however, the piece of the saint's relics are brought ahead of time not into a neighboring church, but into the church to be blessed: it is placed on the diskos, covered with the star and the aer, and placed before the icon of the Savior. After the exclamation "Let us depart in peace" the bishop leaves the church, holding the diskos with the piece of the relics above his head. In this case the procession does not go from one church to the other, then back, but around the newly built church, returning to the doors of the church as the troparia from the order of holy matrimony are sung.

When the procession reaches the doors of the church, the chanters go in and the doors are shut. The bishop and all the clergy and people remain outside the church. The diskos with the relics is placed on a small table prepared for the purpose, and the bishop exclaims, "Blessed is our God." From inside the church the chanters respond, "Amen." The bishop then intones, "Lift up your gates, O you princes, and be lifted up, O eternal gates; and the King of Glory shall enter in." The chanters respond from inside the church, "Who is this King of Glory?" The bishop censes the holy relics, the Gospel, and all those present, after which he again intones, "Lift up your gates," and the chanters again respond, "Who is this King of Glory?" Two prayers are read, in the first of which the bishop asks

God to make this church steadfast unto the end of the age, while in the second he asks that the holy angels might enter the church together with the clergy. After this the bishop raises the diskos with the relics, traces the sign of the cross with it, and, as though in answer to the choir's question, exclaims, "The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory." The doors of the church are opened, and the bishop proceeds into the altar, all the while holding the diskos with the relics above his head.

Upon entering the altar, the bishop places the diskos with the relics on the holy table and again censes the holy relics. Wax-mastic that has "somewhat cooled" and holy chrism are brought. The bishop anoints the piece of relics with holy chrism, places it in a previously prepared reliquary, pours wax-mastic over it, and places it beneath the holy table. Another piece of relics is placed into the antimimension in the same manner. A prayer is read, in which the bishop asks God for the salvation of all those present through the prayers of the martyrs. Then, kneeling together with the people, the bishop reads the final prayer of the order for the consecration, in which, calling to mind the creation of the world and God's appearance to Moses, he asks that the Holy Spirit be sent down upon all those present, and that oneness of mind and peace be preserved among them. The prayer includes a special petition for the founders of the church. The service order concludes with a litany, a dismissal, and the singing of the polychronion. The consecration is immediately followed by the divine liturgy.

If the antimimension is consecrated separately from the church, a special *order for the consecration of an antimimension* is used.¹⁰ This is essentially an abbreviated order of the consecration of a church. Both the prayers and the rituals performed are the same as at the consecration of a church. This is because the antimimension comprises a portable holy table, a kind of portable church.¹¹

Notes

¹Symeon of Thessalonica, *On the Holy Church* (beginning at PG 155:305A).

²*Trebnik* [Book of Needs] (Saint Petersburg: 1884), reverse of 159–reverse of 160.

³*Trebnik* [Book of Needs], part 2 (Moscow: Moscow Patriarchate, 1956), beginning on reverse of 28.

⁴*Chinovnik* [Hierarchal Service Book], book 2, 134–174.

⁵Cf. pp. 34–39 and 11–19 of vol. 4.

⁶Cf. pp. 157, 204.

⁷*Nastol'naya kniga svyashchennosluzhitelya* [Clergy Reference Book] (Moscow: Moscow Patriarchate, 2001), 375.

⁸In Greek, κατασάρκιον/*katasarkion*.—*Trans.*

⁹In Greek, ἐνδυτή/*endyte*.—*Trans.*

¹⁰Cf. the *Chinovnik* [Hierarchal Service Book], part 2, 28–44. This order is called “The Order of the Consecration of Holy Antimensia by the Bishop, Upon Which the Priest Will Serve Divine Services, Where the Holy Table Does Not Contain Relics (translated from the Greek handwritten hierarchal service book).”

¹¹The significance of the antimension is discussed in greater detail on pages 269–270.