

The Churching of Mothers in the Orthodox Church

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This four-part series published on the Saint Phoebe Center website (orthodox-deaconess.org) in the spring of 2016 explores the Orthodox rite of Churching in which mother and child re-join their church community for attending services, the prayers that are recited by the priest, and the implications and meanings of some of the language in these prayers.

Churching Part I: The Orthodox Rite of Churching the Mother and Child After Childbirth

A new mother and father excitedly drive to church on or near the fortieth day after the birth of their new baby. After recovering from childbirth and the sleepless nights of having an infant in the house, they are eager to re-join their church community for the Liturgy, and excited to show off their new baby girl. They arrive early, as instructed by their priest, in order for the mother and baby to be “churched;” the priest will pray the “Prayers for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth” for them.

The mother holds the baby in the back of the church, while the father stands nearby. The priest comes through the church, smiling and welcoming them. Fellow parishioners greet them warmly. The priest begins the service, starting with the beginning prayers.

Soon after beginning the prayers, the priest hesitates for a moment before skipping over the line: “Purify her, therefore, from every sin and from every defilement...” Perhaps he skips this line because of his own discomfort with the connection between childbirth, sin, and defilement? Perhaps he skips it because he does not want to alarm the new mother and her husband, or because he knows of no explanation for “defilement” being mentioned in prayers that serve to welcome a mother back to her church community after childbirth? Whatever the reason, these prayers are often altered on the fly in the American setting, across jurisdictions—if they are even used at all.

What is the meaning behind this language of “defilement” and childbirth? Why is it in this rite? This four-part series about the past, present, and future use of the Churching rite will delve into these questions and others, beginning with the history of the rite.

The earliest surviving rites having to do with the return to church after childbirth are from the eighth century. They are, however, focused not on the mother, but on the baby. It seems that the Christian community was aware that mothers were bringing young, unbaptized babies to church (probably for the proximity to breast feed them). This created an awkward situation, because, at that point in time, unbaptized adults were not allowed in the church for the full Liturgy—and yet here were unbaptized babes-in-arms in attendance. Therefore the Church established prayers for the baby, which welcomed him or her into the church and served as pre-baptismal prayers, granting the unbaptized babies essentially the status of a catechumen.

For centuries, the Churching rite focused on the baby. It was not until the late Byzantine period that prayers having to do with the mother entered the rite at all. At the same time the connection between childbirth and defilement came about. Why, and what does this mean? Stay tuned for “Churching, Part II: A Focus on the Mother and the Putative Connection between Impurity and Childbirth.”

Churching, Part II: A Focus on the Mother and the Putative Connection between Impurity and Childbirth

In the late Byzantine era, a pair of new parents makes their way to church. The mother and child are eager in particular, as they have been absent from church for forty days after she gave birth to their son. The priest meets them at the door of the church, and says pre-baptismal prayers for the baby, praying for his health and salvation: “Lord our God,... strengthen your servant by your power, so that...it may become a child of light

and of the day, and receiving the lot of your elect ones, it may become a communicant of both the precious body and blood of your Christ...”

The priest then turns his focus to the mother with such prayers as, “Purify her, therefore, from every sin and from every defilement,” and, “Wash away her bodily and spiritual uncleanness, in the completion of the forty days. Make her worthy also of the communion of Thy precious Body and Blood.”

For hundreds of years, the Churching prayers were markedly different. They instead focused on the new infant and served as a pre-baptismal rite for her or him. But, around this time, a new connection between “impurity” or “defilement” and childbirth was added into these prayers.

This connection was not “new” in the sense that it exists in ancient Jewish tradition, as recorded in Leviticus, which dictates that women undergo ritual purification after childbirth (and men undergo ritual purification in other situations). In the Jewish context, certain actions—eating particular foods, not washing in a dictated manner—meant that a particular person was “ritually unclean,” which required a purification ritual in order to be in accordance with the Law of Moses and be able to enter the temple.

The Law of “ritual impurity” was not maintained in the Christian context, even though there was debate about this in the early Church and in early canon law. It was understood instead that Christ came to fulfill the Law (Matt. 5:17), and that the spirit of the law, not the letter, was the Christian rule of thumb (2 Cor. 3:6). It was also understood that a state of “impurity” was a state of willfully chosen sin. Rather than a ritual state of circumstance, Christians understood sin to be a voluntary state of “impurity.”

Thus, there had been no connection between childbirth and impurity in the Churching rite prior to the twelfth, thirteenth centuries, when this notion was added to the prayers. This may have been because of late Byzantine interpretation of Jewish law, it may have been non-Christian, pagan superstitions about women’s bodies—the reason that the language of impurity and childbirth was added to the Churching rite is unclear (the same is true for the Prayers for the First Day After Childbirth, which originate in this era).

What is clear is that this theologically poor connection between impurity and childbirth “stuck,” perhaps because the widespread use of the printing press came on the heels of this language being included in these rites.

Another part of these rites that got “stuck” around this same time period was a difference in the way boy babies were churching versus girl babies. Stay tuned for “Churching, Part III: The Baby’s Trip Around the Altar.”

Churching, Part III: The Baby’s Trip Around the Altar

It’s the fifteenth century in Thessaloniki, Greece. After a time of rest and recovery, a new mother and her husband and their six-week old daughter joyfully walk to church together. They are met at the door by the priest, who is expecting them, and other parishioners who greet them warmly. The priest turns his attention to the baby, blessing her with a quick prayer for her salvation, asking the Lord that she “may be numbered among Your holy flock,” in her acknowledgement of her upcoming baptism. Afterwards, the Liturgy commences, and the parents commune with the rest of the “Holy Flock,” while holding their baby.

Later, on the day of the baptism, the priest celebrates the second part of the Churching rite (which is often celebrated as a unified part of the Churching today). After the baptism, he carries the baby girl around the altar, indicating that she is dedicated to God. Had the baby been a boy, this act of consecration would have been no different.

This fifteenth-century scenario is imagined, but we know that scenarios like it happened, thanks to Saint Symeon of Thessaloniki's description of Churching in Thessaloniki at this time. Today, the instructions for the Churching rite usually dictate that male babies go around the altar, but that female babies do not enter the altar. Why this change?

For one thing, the way that the Churching rite took place changed over time, and this confused the matter. There still is jurisdictional variation, but often the prayers for the mother and the baby (mentioned in Churching I & II) take place just before the baby's trip around the altar in modern usage—all of which often takes place before the baby's baptism (be it hours, days, or weeks). This is anomalous in that typically the unbaptized are not brought into an Orthodox altar on any occasion. And yet, here an unbaptized (male) baby is being taken behind the altar.

Originally, the first part of Churching—the prayers for the mother and baby—would have taken place before the baptism, and then the trip around the altar would have taken place after baptism. But, at some point in history the two parts of Churching got conflated into one, and now there is an anomalous situation of an unbaptized (male) infant behind the altar. Today, various theologians and pastors agree that the rite should be split into two parts again, so that only the baptized are in the altar area. This is reflected in the priest's instructions in at least one major jurisdiction in this country.

This explains some of the confusion in the history of the rite, but it does not explain why, after Saint Symeon of Thessaloniki's time, only boys are taken around the altar. Truly, there is no good explanation for this. The Churching of a newly baptized member of the Body of Christ is an offering to God and the altar is where we make such offerings. Baptized women have, in many places and moments in history, been blessed to be in the altar; this is the case of many nuns, many female babies of Saint Symeon's time and earlier, many women who were present at the consecration of a church where it's a tradition for the entire parish to circle the altar, and, frankly, in many cases where it fell to the women of a parish to clean the altar space. Today some people suggest that we only take males into the altar area during their Churching because a male child might be called to the priesthood. However, this suggestion is not historically valid and it obscures the primary meaning of the Churching ritual—that we are offering the newly baptized to God—and should not be a consideration when presenting a newborn at the altar.

Today, the universal practice ought to be that all infants, regardless of sex, go around the altar as part of the completion of their Churching after baptism. More about the practice of Churching today in "Churching, Part IV: Churching in the Twenty-first Century."

Churching, Part IV: Churching in the Twenty-first Century

There is a great deal of variation in the practice of Churching today throughout the Orthodox world. In some parishes, it has simply fallen out of practice. In many others—this seems to be the near-universal situation in American Orthodoxy—the priest alters the Churching rite on the fly, excluding the harsh and theologically poor connection between childbirth and impurity. In some parishes, the mother and baby show up exactly on the fortieth day after childbirth, in others they come just before the mother resumes her worldly activities, like going back to work, which may be well before the forty-day mark.

Not only is the connection between childbirth and impurity theologically poor, since Christ himself cast questions of impurity into the sphere of the consciousness instead of arbitrary bodily function, but it inspires priests to make the executive decision to alter a service of the Church. Although the spirit blows where it will, this at-will alteration is not an uncommon occurrence. The fact that so many priests alter the language of the Churching rite confirms that the impurity/childbirth connection is a problem, and ought to be removed from the rite. The Holy Spirit reveals itself through the life of the Church, and it seems the Spirit is initiating change through the priests of the Church.

All this points to the need for a systemic change to the Churching rite, which various groups within the Church are working on with the hope and prayer that our bishops will bless new rites.

Here is my hopeful vision of the Churching rite in the near future:

A new mother and father make their way to church with their new infant daughter. They are happily greeted by the priest and the rest of the parish just before Liturgy. The priest prays for the mother's well being, her healing from childbirth, her reception back into church after an absence after childbirth, and her salvation. He also prays that the baby will be baptized in good health and will forever remain in Christ's sheepfold. All this he reads directly from new Churching prayers, blessed and distributed by his bishop.

At some point—perhaps this day or another—the baby is baptized, with an adoring crowd of godparents and grandparents and friends present. After the baptism, the priest encircles the altar with the girl in his arms, praying the song of Saint Symeon the God-Receiver, “Now let thy servant depart in peace...” and then the priest concludes by presenting the baby back to his parents or godparents, as local tradition dictates.

All present are aware of the awe that is a new person, a new child of God, born into the world, now formally dedicated to Him, and all are warmly welcoming of the mother in her return to church after childbirth. This scenario is not just imagined; this scene plays out regularly in some jurisdictions in our country today. May the experience of all mothers re-entering the church someday be so welcoming.

Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost is an Orthodox Christian and a scholar of Orthodox Christian theology, writes on matters of family and theology, and cares deeply about the Churching rite because she knows it is often the first and last thing a new mother hears about the Church's understanding of motherhood.

Bibliography of Sources in Churching

This is a small sample of the available scholarship and theological thought on this matter.

Primary Sources:

“Prayer for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth” *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2000), 10-15.

In this translation, the first prayer for the mother reads:

*O Lord God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who by Thy word has created all nature, both reason-endowed men and irrational animals, and has brought all things from nothingness into being, we pray and entreat Thee: Thou hast saved this Thy servant, N., by Thy will. **Purify her, therefore, from every sin and from every defilement** as she now draws near to Thy holy church; and let her be counted worthy to partake, uncondemned, of Thy Holy Mysteries.*

“Prayer for a Woman on the Fortieth Day after Child Birth,” *The Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, Isabel Florence Hapgood, trans. (Englewood, NJ: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, 1975), 268–270.

In this translation, the first prayer for the mother reads:

*O Lord God Almighty, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who by thy word hast created all things, both men endowed with speech and dumb animals, and hast brought all things from nothingness into being, we pray and implore thee: Thou hast saved this thy servant, N., by thy will. **Purify her, therefore, from all sin and from every uncleanness**, as she now draweth near unto thy holy Church; and make her worthy to partake, uncondemned, of thy Holy Mysteries...*

“Prayers for the Churching of a Mother and Child After Forty Days,” *An Orthodox Prayer Book*, Fr. John von Holzhausen and Fr. Michael Gelsinger, trans. (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1977), 38–43.

In this translation, the first prayer for the mother reads:

*O Lord God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who by Your word has made every rational and irrational creature, that brought all things out of nothingness into being: we pray to You and implore You, **cleanse this Your servant (Name), whom by Your Will You have preserved, and who now comes into Your Holy Church, from every transgression, so that she may be accounted worthy to partake of Your holy Mysteries without condemnation...***

“Prayers for the Mother and Child Forty Days after Birth,” *The Priest’s Service Book*, Fr. Evagoras Constantinides, trans. (Thessaloniki, Greece: Melissa, 2003), 19–27.

In this Euchologion, blessed by Archbishop Iakovos of the (then) Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, the rubric for presenting the infant at the altar reads:

*At the churching of the infant, the priest is instructed to “**take the baby(ies) into the Sanctuary**, counterclockwise, around the Holy Altar.” There is no differentiation in the rubrics given the biological sex of the child. Both male and female infants are taken into the altar area at the time of their Churching.*

Secondary Sources:

Miguel Arranz, “Les sacrements de l’ancien euchologe constantinopolitain (3): deuxième partie: Admission dan l’église des enfants des familles chrétiennes,” *Orientalia christiana periodica* 49 (1983): 284-302.

Arranz thoroughly studies the early editions of the Euchologion, The Book of Needs, and this volume focuses on the early, largely pre-baptismal Churching rites.

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “Women in the Church” in the *St. Nina Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1998), trans.

Constantine Takles. Accessed via: <http://www.stnina.org/print-journal/volume-2/volume-2-no-2-spring-1998/women-orthodox-church>.

In this article, Ms. Behr-Sigel argues for treating male and female infants similarly at their Churching based on the Christian understanding that there is “... neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ” (Gal. 3:27–28) through baptism.

Alkiviadis Calivas, *Aspects of Orthodox Worship* (Boston, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003).

In this volume, Fr. Calivas, Professor Emeritus of Liturgics at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, argues that the “pre-baptismal rites should be reviewed so that their language may reflect more accurately modern sensibilities about bodily functions and express better the Christian understanding of human sexuality, conception, birth, ...” (p. 151.) He also cites the witness of Symeon of Thessalonike (1429) that at his time “all baptized infants, regardless of sex, were admitted into the sanctuary...” (p. 152, citing Trempeles, Mikron Euchologion, vol. 1, p. 270–71.)

John Chrysostom, “Homily XXXIII on Hebrews,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 14, trans. Frederic Gardiner, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1889), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240233.htm>.

Here Saint John Chrysostom speaks to early Church understandings of unclean and clean, arguing that the Christian understanding of these things has to do with sin that is chosen or rejected.

Kyriaki FitzGerald, “Orthodox Women and Pastoral Praxis: Observations and Concerns for the Church in America” in the *St. Nina Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 1999). Accessed via:

<http://www.stnina.org/print-journal/volume-3/volume-3-no-2-spring-1999/orthodox-women-and-pastoral-praxis>.

*This article was excerpted and adapted from a paper given at the Intra-Orthodox Conference on Pastoral Praxis in 1985 and subsequently published in *Orthodox Perspectives on Pastoral Praxis* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988). In it, Dr. FitzGerald addresses Women and the Diaconate, Women and ‘Uncleanness,’ and Women and the*

Sanctuary. Here, she argues that the practice of church males and females differently is more culturally determined and not doctrinally (or canonically) based.

Kyriaki FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999).

In this work, Dr. FitzGerald explores the history and possible restoration of Women Deacons. The appendix includes the excerpts of the statements from a number of international consultations of Orthodox women, some of which speak to the issue of “sacramental practices which need study in depth,” including “the practice of churching female babies differently from male babies and the practice of depriving woman of the Eucharist during their period of menstruation that continues to exist in some of our churches.”

Valerie Karras, “The Liturgical Participation of Women in the Byzantine Church,” PhD. Diss Catholic University of America, 2002 (unpublished).

Per the topic of this investigation, Dr. Karras cites the manuscript tradition for the practice of churching infants: The Euchologion Sive Ritual Graecorum, edited by Jacobus Goar, Graz, 1730. p. 269 cites rubrics from the Falasca and Barberini 88 manuscripts that refer to the entrance of the child into the sanctuary; neither gives separate rubrics for male and female infants. She also cites Miguel Arranz, "Les Sacrements de l'Ancien Euchologe Constantinopolitain" (3), OCP (1983), p. 294 for a later practice that included the veneration of all four sides of the altar table for male infants, but only three sides of the altar table for female infants.

Cheryl Kristolaitis, “From Purification to Celebration: The History of the Service for Women after Childbirth,” *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 28, no. 2 (1986): 53-62.

Kristolakis examines the changes in Churching rites—east and west—over time.

Vassa Larin, “What is ‘Ritual Im/purity’ and Why?” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52, nos. 3–4 (2008): 275-292.

Sister Vassa Larin, known for her Coffee with Sister Vassa YouTube series, as well as her liturgical scholarship, recounts the changing history of the concept of impurity in Christian quarters, and makes a strong case that it’s application to women’s bodies is theologically unsound.

Matthew Streett, “What to Do With the Baby? The Historical Development of the Rite of Churching,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 51-71.

Father Matthew Street, a Biblicist, draws together the history of the Churching rite and its variation in texts over time.

Patrick Viscuso, *Sexuality, Marriage, and Celibacy in Byzantine Law* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008).

Viscuso examines the place of impurity in Byzantine canon law.