



CATECHETICAL SERMONS ON THE DIVINE LITURGY

#1 THE GATHERING: “WE HAVE A COMMON ASSEMBLY.”



When we invite people to our homes we usually put the house in order and prepare some refreshments, if not a whole meal. In the format of the Eucharistic Liturgy that we use today, the priest—acting as head of the local family—prepares bread and wine, usually privately, before everyone has gathered.

For most of us, the Liturgy seems to begin as the priest proclaims “Blessed the kingdom of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This very first part of the usual order of the Divine Liturgy is the gathering—and welcoming—of family and friends. And just as in our chance and casual meetings with acquaintances on the street or in the market, we inquire about our guests as to their health, their work, their children, etc. And so today we pray for all our fellow Christians everywhere, living and dead. Originally, what we call today the Great Ektenia was offered after the gospel, and when it was moved to the beginning of the service another litany was inserted there. In the Great Ektenia we hear an echo of St. Paul’s instruction to Timothy (1 Tim. 2:2): “I ask, first of all, that supplication, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people, for emperors and all who lead, that we may pursue a calm and quiet life in all piety and dignity.”

Gathering is not simply a pleasant social event, it is also crucial to human communal and spiritual wellbeing. The Old Testament is full of references to the assembly of the people for worship, and even the New Testament—most often just presuming that Christians will meet—reiterates the sacred character of gathering, for example in Hebrews 10:25, where the text says, “Do not absent yourself from our gathering together, as some have the habit of doing.” One may also look at the only picture of the Last Judgment, in the Gospel of Matthew (25:35 & ff.), where the returning Jesus “will send his angels with a great trumpet blast and gather his chosen together (24:31).” In the Acts of the Apostles (2:42 & ff.) St. Luke gives what might be called “the charter of the Church,” which has four planks: the teaching of the apostles, fellowship or socializing (*koinonia*), the breaking of bread (probably both the Eucharist and the common meal), and to prayers. There can be no fellowship without gathering. St. Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second Christian century, says “On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or in the outlying districts.”

Let us not fail to gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ for the Lord’s Supper. And let us not come late to the gathering. After all, if we were invite to the White House and were expected at a precise time, would we casually linger and come late? Does the Lord deserve any less respect than what we would show to a government official?