

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

By Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost

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.”

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.

(See Bibliography of Sources on following pages)

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 Gelsing, 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 Euchologian, 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 dans l’église des enfants des familles chrétiennes,” *Orientalia christiana periodica* 49 (1983): 284-302.

2 <http://www.orthodoxdeaconess.org/> St. Phoebe Center for the History of the Deaconess

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 Trempelas, 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 its 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.