

Churching Part II

A Focus on the Mother and the Putative Connection between Impurity and Childbirth

By Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost

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.”

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 Resources on Churching below

.....

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 they 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 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 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 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.