

Churching Part III The Baby's Trip Around the Altar

By Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost

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 if 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.”

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 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 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 churching 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.