

Churching Part IV Churching in the Twenty-first Century

By Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost

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.

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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, **cleansing 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 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 Streett, 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.