

CHILDBIRTH IS A BLESSING, NOT AN OCCASION OF IMPURITY

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Multiple petitions are offered for the fruitfulness of a couple's union during an Orthodox marriage service, so many that a college friend characterized my wedding as a fertility rite. One such example: "That He will grant unto them the enjoyment of the blessing of children...let us pray to the Lord."

Based on the sentiment that children are a blessing to be enjoyed that is expressed in the marriage service, one might assume that the Orthodox prayers said after the birth of a child are full of thanksgiving and rejoicing; the nuptial prayers have, after all, been answered. Instead, these qualities are noticeably lacking from the post-childbirth prayers that are part of the Orthodox Euchologion, the compendium of services: the First Day prayers (said soon after childbirth) and the Churching (for when the mother and child come to church the first time after childbirth).

What stands out from these prayers is not thankfulness or rejoicing, but the mother's imputed "uncleanness" or "impurity" as a result of childbirth—a concept that is not supported by the marriage rite, that has no sound theological basis, and that was added to these prayers at a relatively late date. A few samples: "purify her uncleanness," "Wash away her bodily and spiritual uncleanness," and "purify her...from every defilement."

The dominant and persistent Christian understanding of impurity is that Jesus Christ fulfilled Mosaic law, and thereby shifted concepts of impurity from ritualized ones into the realm of free will. As He said quite clearly, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,

but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (Matt. 15:11).

Thus, it is not surprising that the early postpartum prayers lack this putative connection between impurity and childbirth.^[1] It was not until the late Byzantine era that the language of impurity entered these rites. And it was this modified and theologically problematic version of the prayers that received mass distribution through the printing press during the Ottoman period, effectively entrenching the impurity language in the Euchologion.

Scholars have put forth a variety of theories to explain the introduction of this negative language, including an uptick in Christian interest in Mosaic law and the possible influence of the Christian West via the Fourth Crusade (which, drawing on an Augustinian notion of original sin, had included impurity in its prayers at an earlier time). While that debate might never be settled, what is certain is that the association of postpartum motherhood and uncleanness was innovative and inconsistent with previous Christian Liturgical traditions.

This language rings so harshly precisely because of the Christian understanding of impurity as sin. When we implore the Spirit to “cleanse us from every impurity,” in the Trisagion prayers, we are not referring to, for example, washing ourselves of the ritual taint acquired by eating an animal killed by another animal (Lev. 17:15); we are asking for remission of our sins. For new parents to be told that the mother is “unclean” because she just gave birth is not only inaccurate, but confusing and damaging.

In America, many priests simply alter the postpartum prayers on the fly, dropping the impurity-childbirth connection. Some priests read the prayers as they are, but then have no good explanation of postpartum impurity when asked—because there is not one. At least one Greek translation of the Euchologion softens some of the impurity language.

I know of at least one US hierarch who understands the impurity mentioned in these prayers as a sort of impurity acquired after close contact with the holy; that in childbirth, the mother, in her role in the creation of a new human person, has brushed too close to God and must be purified in order to re-enter mundane reality.

This was the explanation offered by Father Alexander Schmemmann to his female students. It is well intentioned and has a beauty to it, but it is ultimately hermeneutical gymnastics; there is no hint of this understanding in the rites or in their history. Interestingly, even with this generous interpretation of impurity, this hierarch believes the rites ought to be changed if for no other reason that the pastoral harm they do.

But now, sanctioned change has come to these prayers. The Antiochian Orthodox Church of North America has published a new volume of all the Church’s initiation services—including First Day and Churching, as well as Baptism and the reception of converts into the Orthodox Church—called *Services of Initiation*.

The editors of this volume, Fathers Michel Najim and Patrick O’Grady of the Antiochian Orthodox Institute, located an ancient version of the First Day prayer that includes thanksgiving for the infant and requests for the mother’s wellbeing—and no mention of impurity. The editors offer an English translation of this prayer next to the traditional Euchologion version.

All references to impurity in the Churching prayers are placed in parenthesis, so they can be easily omitted. The editors also include a version of the miscarriage prayers that lacks the impurity language and addresses other theological problems with these prayers (too complex to elucidate here). The Orthodox Church in America is the one other US jurisdiction that has also blessed new prayers for miscarriage.

Fathers Michel and Patrick give an explanation for these changes in an appendix, rightly noting that the focus on impurity in the Euchologion's postpartum prayers "separates us from the most important pastoral aspect: giving of thanks and glorifying God." Metropolitan Joseph, leader of the AOCNA, also understands the pastoral importance of these prayers; he notes at the beginning of the volume that his own vision is to "possess and employ the best texts in the celebration of the sacred rites of the Church."

There are many complex matters in need of attention by our hierarchs today, to be sure. But, this matter of the postpartum rites is unambiguous: impurity is not part of the Church's understanding of childbirth. These rites could be replaced or altered by all jurisdictions, not just the AOCNA, with relative ease. There is no good reason for our hierarchs to move anything but swiftly on this matter, so that all the faithful can benefit from "the best texts in the celebration of the sacred rites of the Church."

[1] For more information about the history of these prayers, see: 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, as well the appendix of the volume highlighted in this essay: "Appendix A," *Services of Initiation into the Holy Orthodox-Catholic and Apostolic Church*, eds. Father Michel Najim and Father Patrick O'Grady, (LaVerne, CA: The Antiochian Orthodox Institute, 2017).

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