

Church of Our Granddaughters

Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost

Book Club Presentation

Chapter 3: “Churching”

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Good evening! My name is Fr. Stel Muksuris, and I am Professor and Chair of Liturgy, Sacramental Theology, and Languages at the Byzantine Catholic Seminary in Pittsburgh, PA. I am also a board member of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, and a long-time supporter and advocate for the female diaconate in the Orthodox Church. In 2017, I was humbled and honored to join eight fellow liturgiologists in co-authoring and signing the historic theological statement supporting the reinstatement of the female diaconate in the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria in Egypt.

LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS AND NON-ORTHODOX PRACTICES

Our theme tonight, which I was asked to present on, is the Orthodox rite of churching. In colloquial Greek, churching is known as «ἐκκλησιασμός», «σαραντισμός» or «σαράντιση», from the modern Greek «σαράντα», meaning “forty” and referring to the forty days following an infant’s birth. The formal name of this rite, interestingly, has many variations, ranging from “Prayers for a Woman in Childbed on the Fortieth Day” to “Prayers for the Churching of the Child after Forty Days” to “Prayers for the Churching of the Mother and Child, after the Completion of the Forty Days from Birth.” The variations in the ceremonial titles not only reflect the emphasis or focus of the ceremonial prayers (the mother, the child, and forty days) but also indicate the period in the Church’s liturgical history when these prayers were composed.

Now, one may think that when we talk about the rite of churching, we are specifying a ceremonial action common to the Orthodox Church or, more broadly, to Eastern Rite Churches. But this is not the case. In Latin, for example, the title of this rite is *Benedictio mulieris post partum*¹ (“the blessing of a woman after giving birth”). In the Roman Catholic Church, the rite fell into disuse after Vatican Council II in the late 1960s, although traditional Catholics still adhere to the old rite of blessing and thanksgiving.² In the Lutheran Church, churchings were also common, being celebrated after the offering of holy communion. In the Anglican Church’s *Book of Common Prayer*, the “Churching of Women” is likewise celebrated publicly as a celebratory rite for new life. In the US-based Episcopal Church, the “Churching of Women” is a liturgy for the purification or “churching” of women after giving birth. The rite is designated for public celebration on a Sunday, after the intercessions and before communion (when offered), very soon after the birth or adoption of a child. Most notably, the 1979 Book of Common Prayer removed all prior language of ritual impurity. The older rite was replaced with the service called “A Thanksgiving for the Birth

¹ The foci in the prayer is the transformation of the pains of childbirth into joy (cf. John 16:21) and the collective experience of the eschatological bliss in God’s kingdom.

² In the 1984 *Book of Blessings*, the “Blessing of a Woman after Childbirth” is significantly altered from the pre-Vatican II rendering, which presumes impurity references. Also, the current baptismal rite in the Catholic Church offers a prayer for the father, while the churching rite focused solely on the mother and child. In antiquity, the “Order for the Blessing of a Mother after Childbirth” was used for those mothers who could not attend their child’s baptism due to the need to heal and the closeness of the baptism following childbirth. In today’s practice, the prayer may be imparted by a priest, deacon, or authorized lay minister.

or Adoption of a Child.” In the Methodist rite, the rubrics call for a child to be presented to the congregation by the family to give thanks to God for new life.

A RITE OF HOSPITALITY AND JUST BAD THEOLOGY

In her book, Carrie rightly calls churching “a rite of hospitality and blessing, that [should] no longer contain[s] any theologically poor, pastorally harmful, and un-Christian connections between birth and purity.” We can surmise that what can “un-Christianize” anything that is presumably Christian is untrue belief and harmful practice, the very opposite of who God is as ultimate truth, the God who is simultaneously the epitome and source of love and mercy.

For those Orthodox couples blessed to have children and who seek the solace of Christ’s Church on earth, the language they wish to hear is one of joyfulness and celebration. For, as Carrie notes, the nuptial prayers from the mystery of holy matrimony have been answered. Sadly, in many places that adhere to prayerbooks and euchologia that have not been scrutinized and corrected for their textual content and rubrics, a mother is subjected to deprecatory language upon returning to her church. Liturgical texts that refer to a mother who has given birth as “defiled”, “filthy”, and in need of “purification” almost debase her to the level of a “criminal”, whose great “sin” or “offense” against God is, quite peculiarly, obeying the divine mandate from Scripture to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), and not one of a moral or ethical character.

As was made evident in Chapter 2 on “Menstruation”, the religious castigation and censure for a God-given, natural life process is outrightly nonsensical and unacceptable. The late fourth-century Syrian church order, *the Apostolic Constitutions*, is characteristic and clear on this matter, as are St. Pope Gregory the Great, the Dialogist (r. 590-604), and other prominent Church authorities.

For neither lawful mixture [intercourse], nor childbearing, nor the menstrual purgation, nor nocturnal pollution can defile the nature of man [a human being], or separate the Holy Spirit from him [them]. Nothing but piety and unlawful practice can do that. For the Holy Spirit always abides with those that are possessed of it, so long as they are worthy.³

It is abundantly clear that the development of liturgical practice in the ancient Church often drew on Judaic practices. Not only did Christian liturgical rites mimic their Jewish forebears rubrically, but they also inherited much of the ritualistic language *and mindset*, which was neither always cordial nor accommodating. The forty-day churching rite is a Jewish purification rite drawn from Leviticus 12:1-7,⁴ and certainly one to which the Theotokos and Christ were subject as faithful Jews themselves.

³ *Apostolic Constitutions*, Book VI, xxvii. Edits in brackets mine.

⁴ The text in full: “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘If a woman has conceived, and borne a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as in the days of her customary impurity she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. She shall then continue in the blood of *her* purification thirty-three days. She shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary until the days of her purification are fulfilled. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her customary impurity, and she shall continue in the blood of *her* purification sixty-six days. When the days of her purification are fulfilled, whether for a son or a daughter, she shall bring to the priest a lamb of the first year as a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Then he shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement for her. And she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This *is* the law for her who has borne a male or a female.’”

This condemnatory language is not only grossly inconsistent with the joyfulness that a couple is riding from their wedding into childbirth, but it is also inexcusably incompatible with the Orthodox theological anthropology outlined in the first chapter of the book. As Carrie notes, “There is a profound mismatch between the denigration of the female body present in Churching and the Orthodox Church’s teaching on the Incarnation, the human body, the value of maternity, and human life in the womb and childbirth”⁵ (p. 44).

Thus, bad practice that reflects bad theology and bad theology that fuels bad practice does nothing less than “un-Christianize” the experience of a prominent moment of worship in a family’s life. To quote the late Fr. Alexander Schmemmann: “A decadent liturgy supported by a decadent theology and leading to a decadent piety: such is the sad situation in which we find ourselves today and which must be corrected if we love the Church and want her to become again the power which transforms the life of man.”⁶

HISTORICAL PRECEDENCE REGARDING THE PRAYERS

It is true that in the Church’s manuscript tradition, the extant sources available to us that speak about churching, like the oldest Byzantine euchologion from the eighth century, the *Barberini Codex 336*, focus only on the child. There is no mention made of the mother whatsoever. As such, in the Church’s consciousness, the forty-day churching is understood as a pre-baptismal rite for the baby, following the first-day prayers and the child’s naming on the eighth day. The child is made a peripheral “member” of the church, a catechumen of sorts, in preparation for their baptism.

The modern rite consists of two couplets of prayers, for a total of four prayers. The last couplet—prayers 3 and 4—is the most ancient, and both center exclusively on the child, focusing on the joyfulness of new life and anticipating the child’s baptism. By the twelfth century, the first couplet that specifically addresses the mother appears, using deprecatory language toward the mother, largely reminiscent of the Old Testament Levitical code. These are today’s prayers 1 and 2, with the amended references regarding the child if it survived the birth.

So, why this shift? Within the Byzantine East, the victory over Iconoclasm and the prominent Studite liturgical reforms of the middle- to late-ninth century, largely achieved by the monks and celibate clergy of the Church, paved the way for the monastic ranks to assume control of the Church’s liturgical traditions, customs, hymnology, and theology.⁷ This meant that monks were now charged with composing many of the prayers, with the intent to align Christian rites with historical biblical events. Consequently, the interpretation of these events likewise drew on Old Testament theological concepts, with very little, if any, consideration of the Church’s theological

⁵ See also Iōannēs Phountoulēs, who writes: “Likewise, it is worthy of our particular attention that the reference to sacred history, which gives the theological fortification and meaning of the Christian practice, does not refer to the provisions of Leviticus concerning the purification of the woman, but only to the example of the Lord. The mother is not considered unclean, nor is her liturgical purification sought.” See Iōannēs M. Phountoulēs, *Answers to Liturgical Questions: A Complete and Annotated Translation*. Vol. 3. Ed. and trans. Patrick Viscuso *et al.* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2023), p. 249.

⁶ A. Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 11.

⁷ For a good treatment of this shift toward the monasticization of the Byzantine Church’s liturgical life, see Robert F. Taft, SJ, *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

anthropology. All but forgotten was the pronouncement that Christ has supplanted the curse of the Law through His own death and has fulfilled it, restoring all of humanity, woman and man, to the fullness of their inherent image and likeness in God (cf. Ephesians 2:15).

This liturgical overhaul, or “monasticization” of the Church’s worship, was accompanied by other factors, such as a further male clericalization in the Byzantine Church by priest-monks and bishops. Exactitude in liturgical celebrations and attention to ritual detail and purity by male clergy led to the need for altar-related purification, thus leading to the decline of the order of the female diaconate in the East, “partly on the premise that the putative impurity of menstruation excludes women from the altar” (p. 47). Inherent also in this mindset was the development of a sin-focused and body-denying emphasis, a return to Neoplatonic and Gnostic tendencies.

TO ENTER OR NOT TO ENTER THE ALTAR? THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Following the prayers read at the beginning of the rite, the service of churching concludes with a ritual act involving the child’s entrance (or not) into the holy altar. Liturgically, this action is an imitation of St. Symeon’s encounter and reception of the infant Jesus into his arms in the Jerusalem Temple. In the Church, it is, essentially, a dedication service whereby all children, and not just firstborn males as in the Mosaic Law, are dedicated to God.

A complex and dubious history accompanies this part of the service as well. Again, the rubrics regarding the entrance of a child into the sanctuary originate in the late Middle Ages of Byzantium and well after the first prayers for the child appear in *Barberini*. The manuscript tradition regarding this ritual practice varies. As Carrie observes, there are practices that include both sexes being carried around the altar, neither sex being carried around the altar, and only males being carried around the altar.

Practically all the earliest manuscripts witness to the fact that all children were carried into the holy altar “regardless of gender” («ἀδιακρίτως φύλου»)⁸. The one exception we encounter is in the early 15th century manuscript *Sinai 968*, which states that only males are brought into the altar. Similarly, St. Symeon of Thessaloniki (+1429), the last great liturgical commentator of the Byzantine Church, indicates that even after baptism, the child is still dedicated to God and, by being carried around the altar table, offers his or her first act of worship as an Orthodox Christian. In a variation for both sexes, females were carried around the three sides of the altar (right-back-left) but never in front of the holy table, whereas males were, and the dismissal was done at the solea. Another fun fact: Symeon believed that the churching rite produced a catechumen out of the infant. So, ideally in terms of sequence, the churching prayers were read at the baptism,⁹ following the exorcism and catechism portion and before the baptism proper.

TEMPORARY EXCOMMUNICATION OR SANCTION TO RETURN TO COMMUNION?

⁸ Entrance of females into the sanctuary is well documented in the Orthodox Church, as the deaconesses were ordained by the bishop in the holy altar and even received holy communion there. See, e.g., the *Canons of Hippolytus* (canons 19 and 143), Dionysios of Alexandria (canon 2), and Theodore Balsamōn.

⁹ If the mother was present, the prayers for the mother were read. If she was absent because she was still healing, only the prayers for the child were read.

Carrie makes an insightful observation regarding the language of forgiveness in the prayers for the mother. She writes:

“There is inherent wisdom and sense in giving a woman a blessing to stay home after childbirth because this is a time when rest and recovery are needed. It is also unique and helpful in Orthodox practice that the language around forgiveness in Churching can be understood as sanction for the woman to return to the Eucharist without going to confession first” (p. 49).

She immediately adds that typically any long absence for whatever reason from communion typically would necessitate confession before approaching the chalice. Churching, in a sense, “bypasses” this requirement, and for good reason. However, this intentional absence from the eucharistic life of the Church necessitates the forgiveness language not because of impurity but because of the possibility of accumulating sins or moral wrongdoings during one’s absence from the Church’s liturgical life. In addition, one may regard the rite of churching as a rectification of an important canon of the Church regarding excommunication; namely, Canon 80 of the Penthekte Ecumenical Council (680-681), which mandates the deposition of clerics or excommunication of laymen who fail to attend church services for three consecutive Sundays without a valid reason. However, while this canon has in mind those individuals who either recklessly or ignorantly avoid the sacramental life of the Church due to negligence or simply a secularly-minded disposition, there is nothing reckless or sinful that a new mother has done when fulfilling the will of God to warrant the language of excommunication and personal debasement.

Words matter, and words must be consistent to maintain the theological accuracy and propriety the Church must have at all times.

LITURGICAL RENEWAL – TEXTUAL AND RUBRICAL STANDARDIZATIONS

Carrie concludes this chapter by pointing out the desperate efforts of parochial clergy and individual hierarchs to “soften” the condemnatory language inherent in the prayers, as well as to find arbitrary and often poor explanations for the abuses of simply bad liturgy. While cognizant of the dilemma, many well-intentioned and empathetic clergy take it upon themselves to right the wrongs of the past by making changes on the fly. This is not enough and it can even amount to a dangerous solution.

The problem, I would argue, is systemic. In other words, liturgical renewal must not be done in individual camps and solely by priests; it must be standardized for the entire Church by the entire Church. And most importantly, as Carrie points out, women, who are clearly the focus of this rite, must, without exception, be the vital part of the decision-making process regarding the rite of churching in the Orthodox Church. It is utterly foolhardy to have the content and rubrics of a rite for a family dictated by celibate men, regardless of their advancement in the spiritual life—monks and bishops—from a particular epoch in the Church’s liturgical history.

I have written elsewhere that the time has come for the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox scholarly world, the Academy, to cease traveling opposite each other on perfectly parallel lines.¹⁰ Their work—our work—must intersect. Carrie rightly argues:

Yet, it would be most appropriate for theologically trained women who have given birth and then walked back through the narthex doors to rejoin their community with an infant in their arms to recraft the Churching prayers which would then be adopted by bishops. This is not to suggest that the Orthodox Church's male clergy have nothing to offer new mothers, but it is to say that it is fitting for mothers to pen these prayers, given their history and given the fact that mothers understand what the postpartum time period is like in a way that the male clergy simply cannot, no matter how sympathetic, well-intentioned, or pastorally gifted.

The matter of the postpartum rites is unambiguous: impurity is not part of the church's understanding of childbirth or women's bodies. These rites could be replaced or altered by all jurisdictions ... with relative ease and with the willing assistance of Orthodox mothers. Orthodox synods could easily call upon women/mother scholars to craft new Churching rites and then distribute them (p. 51).

This suggestion is most welcome, precisely because it is inclusive and sensible. I would only offer that this work of textual and rubrical revision is achieved in collaboration with other liturgiologists, men or women, who are willing to work with female scholars, mothers, hierarchs, and synods. The presence of liturgical scholars on such a committee is imperative, in order to keep the dialogue and results real, relevant, and within the creative Tradition of the Church. I would even offer myself to this task, as a member of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Synod on Liturgical Texts and, as of now, the proposed editor and stylist for all future liturgical publications of the GOA. A subcommittee of the synod could be formed and begin this collaboration, that would only enhance the liturgical witness of the Church and bring the Church's liturgical practice to correspond more closely to her proper theological anthropology.

The language in the prayers for the mother need not simply be “softened” but changed altogether, to reflect a rite of hospitality that celebrates not only the miracle of life, but the grandeur of womanhood and motherhood. Forgiveness of sins possibly committed before communion, as with confession, is for one's justified and necessary absence from the Church's eucharistic life.

In a lecture I gave almost two years ago to the Metropolis of Pittsburgh Clergy during a retreat at Holy Protection Women's Monastery in the Poconos, I made several additional suggestions, which I share with you now. First, regarding the rubric of infants entering the altar, in keeping with the overwhelming evidence from the manuscripts, all children regardless of sex should be carried into the altar, since no child is ever denied baptism (and therefore becoming a catechumen). The entrance would be through the south deacon's door and to the south, east, and north of the holy table (not the front), and out through the north deacon's door, with the dismissal done at the solea.

¹⁰ See my article, “Can We Talk? The Church and Her Academy in the Dialogue of Liturgical Renewal”, on the website of *The Orthodox Theological Society in America*, <https://otsamerica.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Muksuris-Blog-Essay-copy.pdf>, accessed 29 June, 2026.

With regard to the insertion of the churching rite during public worship, I admit that the appropriate place should be during Vespers the evening before or at the end of Matins or Hours, before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. This naturally implies the presence of other worshipers from the community, since the child is dedicated to the living community of faith and not to a building. Another option I have thought about is during the Divine Liturgy, before communion, in the presence of the entire community. This would allow the full eucharistic community to welcome the family back to the church and “meet” the churching child. It would also allow the family to receive communion together, as the seal of their (and the community’s) celebration and thanksgiving for the celebration of new life and the combination of blessed motherhood and fatherhood.

And speaking of fathers, I have another important suggestion. Hardly any mention is made of the father of the child in the churching rite. The dependency of the rite on its Levitical prototype and its castigation of women for the sake of maintaining ritual purity betrays the very notion of moral sin as belonging to all genders. The father in the rite seems to be let off scot-free. If the father is to assist his wife during her healing and rest on the weekends, and does not attend the Divine Liturgy himself, again for “valid” reasons, then the prayer of forgiveness and welcome should be extended to cover his own moral sins as well, bypassing the need for confession as in the case of the mother. In fact, the parents return to their worshipping community and honored for their joint parenthood, which the Church celebrates. And what more beautiful act than to receive holy communion together as a unit, as they introduce their child as a peripheral member of the Church now preparing for holy baptism!

Additionally, the prayer can also incorporate a petition for the godparents-to-be, especially if they were the sponsors at the parents’ wedding.¹¹ This reimagining of the rite would ensure a welcome and logical continuity between the wedding and the birth of children, and it would ensure that a sound theology pervades the sacraments that mark the human circle of life.

In conclusion, in order to remain faithful to our fundamental Orthodox theology and anthropology, and to truly minister to the mother and to the father and to the child with Christlike sensitivity and love, reimagining the rite of churching may necessitate not only perhaps a substantial overhaul of the ritual but the creation of several forms of the rite, conducive to the conditions or settings in which people find themselves. This would include, but would not be limited to, a rite for parents adopting a child, a rite for a non-Orthodox parent, a rite for when both parents are Orthodox, the situating of a rite during a Divine Liturgy and during a non-eucharistic service, and even a rite of churching held before a baptism or on the same day as a baptism.

Ultimately, to be in “creative continuity with the revered past” means to be open to the whisperings and guidance of the Holy Spirit, as He leads us through meaningful theology and meaningful liturgy that reflects it. The dignity of every human being, created in God’s image and likeness is preserved in every rite of the Orthodox Church; the pre-baptismal rites, and most especially the forty-day churching of the family and child, should never be an exception.

¹¹ In fact, at the churching, the couple may even choose to wear their crowns from their wedding, as a witness of their obedience to the divine commandment of procreation and co-creation, as a sign of their God-given authority to be a family, whether they have children or not. Naturally, such a radical suggestion does not exist liturgically in the Church, but perhaps it may provide visual affirmation and future food for thought.