

## **Spirituality of Our Church Rituals VI:**

### **Iconostasis**

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When Lord ordered Moses to set the Tabernacle, He ordered Moses to set two curtains of fine linen woven with blue, purple, and red wool (Exodus 26). One separates between the house and the Holy and the second separates between the Holy and the Holy of Holies (Hebrews 9). In addition to these, there was another curtain which separated the house of Israelites and that of Gentiles and the Roman soldiers.

The structure of the Church is not coincidental. It follows predefined rules and guidelines. The floor is divided into three parts: sanctuary, nave, and vestibule. The vestibule is the first area of the Church when entering the structure. During the first centuries of Christianity, this area was assigned to the catechumens. The catechumens were given instructions in the faith that would prepare them for Baptism and were not allowed into the nave or church proper. This is why the Sacrament of Baptism begins in the vestibule in the Coptic Rite. The nave is the main body of the Church where the people gather for worship. The sanctuary is the most important division of the Church where the Holy Altar is located. The sanctuary is usually situated on a platform. Heaven (represented by the sanctuary) and earth (represented by the nave) are brought together by the Lord Jesus Christ. The sanctuary and the nave are divided by the screen of icons called iconostas. In front of the iconostas there is the deacon's nave where the deacons stand worshipping during the Divine Liturgy and some sacraments such as Marriage, as well as several services are performed there. So the Church is designed to have an iconostas that separates the sanctuary from the congregation house keeping the discipline in the church and for the honor of the Altar where the sacrifices are sanctified. It teaches us to separate between what is spiritual and what is materialistic as The Lord separates between light and darkness (Genesis 1:4). Also, it teaches the priests to separate between the Altar service and congregation service as God gives different gifts to serve in His House which is us (Hebrews 3).

In Greek, iconostasis means "a place on which the icons stand". The icons of the iconostasis are a representation of a sacred or sanctified person that are used to help the faithful focus on prayer and on the key elements of faith. So everyone of the congregation directs his eyes and mind to those who offered their lives to the Lord and so does as they did. The iconostas expresses the unity of God and man through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is both God and man.

The Iconostasis divides the sanctuary, the symbol of Heaven, and the nave, the symbol of earth. A typical iconostasis has two rows of icons on the top. The top layer is called "Prophets Tire" and shows the icons of the prophets from the Old Testament, the second layer is called "Apostles' tire" and would depict the 12 Apostles, the events of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, or the major Royal feast days.

On the highest point of the iconostasis should be a large crucifix with a painted image of the Lord Jesus Christ Crucifixion with the two thieves' one on the right and other on the left (Matthew 27:38). So the congregation usually meditates upon the Crucifixion and how much suffering the Lord Jesus Christ endured to save us. It recalls to us the faith of the right thief who declared his faith by the Lord Jesus Christ as The King and The Lord and so he deserved the Paradise of Joy as the Lord promised him to be in the Paradise on that day (Luke 23:12, 43). The left thief recalls and symbolizes

those who deny The Lord will be on the left in the lake of fire on His Second Coming. So those who lived righteously in the faith of The Son of God will be on His right in the Kingdom of Heaven while those who lived un-righteously will be on the left in the lake of fire (Matthew 25:33 & 34).

Beside the picture of the Crucifixion there are pictures of St. Mary the Virgin and St. John the Beloved standing under the Holy Cross for honoring them as they followed the Lord Jesus Christ to the Cross (Luke 19:26). So every one of congregation should fix his own eyes to the Lord on the Cross bringing to memory His sufferings and pain for our salvation as he said *"When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to me"* (John 12:32). St. Paul said to the *Hebrews* *"Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross. On the contrary because of the joy that was waiting for him He thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross and He is now seated at the right side of God's throne. Think of what he went through how he put up with so much hatred from sinners. So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up"* (Hebrews 12:2-3). *"And those who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death their human nature with all its passion and desires"* Galatians 5:24.

The iconostasis has a center double door called the "Royal Door" and two single doors on each side called "Deacons Doors" which are used by the deacons and others who assist with the services. The Royal Gate is the symbol of the passage between Heaven and Earth. Why are the center doors of the iconostasis called the "Royal Doors"? The answer is: The center doors of the iconostasis are properly called the Royal Doors because it is through these doors that we receive the King of Glory, Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the priest's blessings, in the words of the Holy Gospel, and in Holy Communion. Also, the "King of Glory" brings the Holy Eucharist through priest to feed his faithful people. Also, as history tells us, when in the countries of the East, where the Churches were originally located, had an emperor or king, he would proceed through the Royal Doors to receive Holy Communion from the priest or bishop at the Holy Altar. Today, only the patriarch, bishops, priests and deacons accompanied by the priest (at certain times as during Lamb's Offering) may pass through the Royal Doors, because of the door's great holiness.

Six icons should be on the Royal doors in the iconostasis, they are the icons of the Annunciation: the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Archangel Gabriel on the top and of the Four Evangelists: Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke and Saint John on the bottom. The icon of the Annunciation is placed to tell us that it is through these doors that the Good News of the Lord Jesus Christ is announced to us, just as the Archangel Gabriel announced to the Holy Virgin that she would become the Mother of God, of Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us". - The Four Evangelists are placed on the Royal Doors because through these doors the Holy Gospel that was written by them is announced to us.

The significance of these icons is important and carries an important responsibility. Through them we see the Four Evangelists and hear the words that they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as they are proclaimed for us by the priest or deacon at the Divine Liturgies. We also must accept the Holy Gospel message that we heard and imitate the Evangelists as was commanded by Our Savior Jesus Christ: *"Go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"* (Mt. 28:19). The icon of the Annunciation proclaims to us that "God is with us"; that the Lord Jesus Christ the Emmanuel is present in the Church - is in our midst, in the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle, in His teachings in the Holy Gospel Book and in His Holy Sacraments to assure our salvation.

Over the Royal Gate, there is the icon of the Last Supper. The icon to the right of the Royal Gate is that of Christ the High Priest or Christ the Teacher because with His teachings ("I am the way") and His sacrifice, reopened for us the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven. To the right of it is the icon of St. John the Baptist. To the left of the Royal Gate is the icon of the Virgin Mary and the Child, Jesus and to the left of this icon is the Saint for whom the Church is named. Hanging above the Royal Gate is the Eternal Light which is always lit as the symbol of the never ending presence of God. Deacon's Doors with the icons of the archangels, Michael and Gabriel, are on the left and right sides of the Royal Gates.

Beeswax candles are placed in the candle stands near icons by the faithful. Beeswax and olive oil, as the purest of substances and free from animal matter, are used for lighting before sacred things. The wax and oil are symbolic of the purity and sincerity of the gifts that provide them. Icons are honored with incense. The censuring of the icons is symbolic of the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is shed upon all. The censer represents the Lord Jesus Christ, the Divine Ember.