

In the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church, as in all Catholic and Orthodox Churches, both east and west, the day begins in the evening with the setting of the sun. Like the Jews of old, this practice follows the Biblical account of creation: *"And there was evening and there was morning, one day."* -Genesis 1:5

The Service that marks this transition from one day to the next is called "Vespers." On the eve of Sundays and feastdays of the Church, this service of Vespers is further enhanced and is called "Great Vespers." Great Vespers includes the service of deacons, and can even have vested and concelebrating priests.

Following the introductory Trisagion Prayers, the Vespers service begins with the hierarch (senior cleric) or reader chanting what is called the "Proemial" or evening psalm: *"...the sun knows the hour of its setting, You make darkness and it is night..."* -Psalm 103 This psalm, which glorifies God's creation of the world, is man's very first act of worship, for man first of all meets God as Creator. The assembly, facing east, listens to the words with great attention.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, O Lord my God, You are very great, indeed... O

Lord, how manifold are Your works! In Wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your creatures." -Ps. 103

Following the Proemial Psalm, the Great Litany, the opening petition of all the major liturgical services of the Church is intoned. In it we pray to the Lord for all classes of people, for everyone and everything.

Following this litany a number of psalms are chanted, a different group each evening. These psalms, called the Kathismata, though they are recited in monasteries, are normally omitted in parish churches.

Psalm 140, however, is always chanted at Vespers. During this psalm the evening sacrifice of incense is offered: *"Lord, to You I call, hasten to me, O Lord... Let my prayer rise like incense before You. The lifting up of my hands like an evening sacrifice. Hasten to me, O Lord."* -Psalm 140:1-2

During the Psalms that follow, special hymns, called "Stichera," are inserted and sung for the particular day, for the feast and in honor of the various saints commemorated that day. At Great Vespers on Saturday evenings, the beginning of the Lord's Day, these beautiful hymns always praise Christ's resurrection from the dead.

The stichera normally end with a song called a "Theotokion" which

honors Mary, the Mother of God. If it Saturday evening, or the eve of a feastday an entrance procession is made. The priest and deacon come to the center of the temple with lighted candles and incense and the deacons calls us attentive prayer as the priest then intones the first words of the ancient vesperal hymn: "O Joyful Light..." This beautiful hymn, (Phos Hilaron in Greek) is one of the great treasures of the Church, is one most ancient of Church hymns, and is part of every Vesper service.

O Joyful Light of the holy glory of the Father Immortal; heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ! Since we have come to the setting of the sun and have seen the evening light. We praise God the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. It is proper for You to be praised at all times by fitting melodies. O Son of God, Giver of Life, therefore the world glorifies You.

In this beautiful hymn Christ is rightly praised as the Light which illumines us in midst of life's darkness. Jesus is the Light of the world and of the Kingdom of God which shall have no evening (see Isaiah 60:20, Rev 21:25). During the hymn candles are lit and the church is illuminated as if in joyful response to its message of hope. A new day in Christ has begun.

The Prokimenon, a verse from the Psalms, follows -- a different one for each day, announcing the day's spiritual theme. At Sunday Great Vespers on Saturday evening a small but interesting custom takes place. As the prokimenon is chanted the priest turns the Gospel Book over so that the Icon of Christ's Resurrection is now face up. The reason? Every Sunday is a celebration of Christ's Resurrection. (Outside of Sunday, and throughout the 50 days of Pascha, the side with the icon of the Crucifixion ordinarily faces up). If it is a special feastday three, or even more, readings from the Old Testament are included. Then more evening prayers and petitions follow with additional hymns for the particular day, all of which end with the bishop or priest reciting the Prayer of St. Simeon:

Now You shall dismiss Your servant, O Lord, according to Your word in peace: because my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people, Israel. -Luke 1:29-32

After proclaiming the vision of Christ, the Light and Salvation of the world, we prayerfully listen as the prayers of the Thrice-Holy (Trisagion) are again prayed. We then join in singing the Troparia, (theme songs

of the day,) and we are dismissed with the usual blessing.

On certain feastdays, two further actions may enhance the celebration of the feast: Litya and Artoclasia. "Litya" is a festive procession made three times around the church with the icon of the feast which is then incensed and enshrined for the assembly's veneration. "Artoclasia" is a blessing of wheat, wine, oil and five loaves of bread followed by the festive anointing of the faithful with scented oil and the distribution of the then blessed bread and wine. This latter ceremony serves to break any fast and gives sustenance for those who might be keeping an All-Night vigil of prayer, as was the custom in the early Church.

The service of Vespers takes us through creation, sin, and salvation in Christ. It leads us in the meditation of God's Word and the glorification of His love for men. It instructs us and allows us to praise God for the particular events or persons whose memory is celebrated and made present to us in the Church. It prepares us for the sleep of the night and the dawn of the new day to come. And, most importantly, on the eves of those days when the Divine Liturgy is served, it begins our movement into the most perfect communion with God in the sacramental mysteries.

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THE PRAYER OF CHRIST'S CHURCH



UNDERSTANDING VESPERS IN THE MELKITE CHURCH