

## SERMON on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, February 16, 2020

(Based on *The Shape of the Liturgy* by Dom Gregory Dix)

The Mystical Supper, or what in the West is commonly called the “Last Supper” was not a Passover meal. St. John the Theologian makes this very clear in His gospel. It was very common in Jewish practice for little private groups or informal societies of friends banded together to share a formal religious meal. The timing of when our Lord and His disciples met in the upper room for this meal, as well as the way this supper was regarded by the primitive Christian Church, as well as the way this supper was celebrated by the Lord and the Apostles, makes it very clear that this was *not* the Passover seder. We all understand that the Mystical Supper and the first Eucharist was celebrated on the eve of our Lord’s betrayal and crucifixion. Bread and wine are blessed and the Lord commands the disciples to “Do this in remembrance of me.” Elsewhere, the Lord says, “He who does not eat my Body (literally, my *flesh*) and drink my Blood has no life in Him (John 6:53)”. The New Testament Greek for the bread used during the first Eucharist is *artos*, which means *leavened bread*. Churches that believe the Mystical Supper (or “the Last Supper”) was a Passover meal use *unleavened* bread when they celebrate their eucharist, because only unleavened bread, or matzahs, were permitted at the Passover seder. This is a very important and fundamental difference between the Orthodox Church and many of the Western denominations. The primitive Church understood very well that the celebration of the Divine Liturgy was primarily a corporate act that was *done*. In the West it is common to hear, for example, as of the clergy, *saying mass*, and of the laity, *hearing mass*, or to *attend* the mass. The early Christians, however, habitually spoke of “*doing* the Eucharist.” Each member of the Church: Bishop, Presbyter (or *priest*), Deacon and layperson understood his or her role and that each played an important and necessary role in the celebration of the Eucharist, without whom the Eucharist could not be celebrated. Each had an irreplaceable function that the other celebrant or participant did not do. No one ever kneeled to receive Holy Communion, the posture was to always stand when receiving the Holy Mysteries. The practice of kneeling by anybody for Holy Communion is confined to the Latin West and made its appearance in the Middle Ages. Today we tend to regard Christian worship as a *public* activity, in the sense that it ought to be open to all comers. The apostolic and early Church, on the contrary, regarded all Christian worship, and especially the Eucharist, or the Divine Liturgy, as a highly *private* activity, and rigidly excluded all strangers from taking any part in it whatsoever. This was not the result of persecutions or out of fear, but based on a very fundamental ecclesiology, or understanding of the identity of the Church. Christian worship was intensely corporate, but it was not ‘public.’ It was not that the Church did not desire converts; she was ardently missionary to all who would hear. But meetings to proselytize were rigidly separated from ‘worship’, so that they were not even accompanied by prayer. They were confined to the announcing of the Christian message by the reading of the Scriptures and oral instruction, and then all who were not already of the ‘laity’ by baptism and chrismation—even those who were already convinced of the truth of the Gospel but had not already received those Holy Mysteries (*sacraments*)—were invariably turned out before prayer of any kind was offered, let alone the Eucharist. This developed into the two parts of the Divine Liturgy that we celebrate today, the Liturgy of the catechumens and the Liturgy of the faithful. Hence, the Liturgy of the catechumens is primarily Scriptural and instructional. Before we can begin the Liturgy of the faithful the catechumens are asked to leave. If you are living in a society or culture where most people are sharing the same Christian faith, it is understandable that the private nature of worship tended to become more public. However, we are living in a pluralistic society today of many diverse creeds and faiths whose dogmas are contrary if not hostile to Orthodoxy; as well as in the midst of a society where many people do not believe or practice Christianity as the early Christians did and who do not live moral lives as taught by our Savior, Holy Scripture and as practiced by the early Church. Next time I will speak more particularly about the actual ritual of our liturgy and try to explain the various parts of what we say and do, what they mean,

and why we do them. It is my hope to “demystify” our Divine Liturgy and have everyone be active participants and not have anyone be a spectator, for example, wondering what is going on when the curtain is closed or tempted to make peripheral comparisons between worship of the contemporary Latin West with Orthodox Divine worship. Amen.