

CONSECRATION 101

Understanding the Sacred Tradition of Consecrating a Church

A primer for the faithful of Holy Trinity Community in preparation for the Consecration of Holy Trinity Church on November 3 & 4, 2023.

Photos taken from the Consecration of the Saint George Chapel - May 4, 2019



WHAT IS A CONSECRATION?

The Consecration is the service of sanctification and solemn dedication of a building for use as a church. It is a special service which “changes” an ordinary building into the House of God. Like the Baptism of a child or the ordination of a priest, this change takes place through the Grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Consecration of a church is a complex service that is filled with profound symbolism and many biblical elements and references. The Consecration is different from and usually takes place awhile (sometimes years) after, the blessing of the ground and the church’s formal opening for worship (Thryanoixia). The Consecration service of Holy Trinity Church in Pittsburgh is scheduled for Saturday, November 4, 2023, to be celebrated by His Eminence Metropolitan Savas of Pittsburgh. The liturgical schedule for the Consecration Services is as follows:

- **Friday, November 3**
7:00pm Consecration Vespers
- **Saturday, November 4**
8:00am - Orthros
9:00am - Consecration Liturgy and Procession with the Holy Relics
12:00pm - Celebration Luncheon

The information in this article will be helpful understanding the beauty, meaning and symbolism of every part of this sacred event.



As Isaiah says, islands will be dedicated to God, which are to be understood as the churches of the Gentiles, which have recently been established, and have their sturdy construction by God. Therefore let us also spiritually celebrate the festival of the present Consecration.

Hymn from the Service of Consecration of an Orthodox Church

THE CONSECRATION VESPERS

On the evening before the Consecration, the new Holy Altar Table is cleared. Everything is removed, including the covering, so that it stands bare and ready to be washed and anointed during the upcoming services. The hierarchy enters the Church, carrying the relics of three Holy Martyrs sent from the Archdiocese in a special ecclesiastical box called a "Reliquary." The Reliquary is placed on a Paten, which is the gold diskos or round stemmed plate that holds the bread for Holy Communion, and it is placed on the Holy Altar Table, where it remains overnight, accompanied by a Vigil Light. His Eminence then presides over the celebration of a special service of the Preparation of the Relics, which includes hymns honoring the memory of the Holy Martyrs. This is followed by the Great Vespers Service. *(Note: The identity of the saints whose relics will be placed in the Holy Altar are not known until they are specially delivered to the Church just prior to the Consecration.)*

THE CONSECRATION SERVICE

The following morning parishioners gather early in the Church for the celebration of the Orthros, the Consecration Service and the Divine Liturgy. The hierarchy enters the Church and proceeds to the Holy Sanctuary, where the Vigil Light awaits on the Holy Altar table, lit in front of the relics of Holy Martyrs.

At the conclusion of the Orthros, the Divine Liturgy begins and continues as usual until the exclamation, "For You, our God, are holy, and to You we offer up glory." In a regular Divine Liturgy, this would be followed by the "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal" hymn. Instead, special prayers for the Consecration are inserted. The first prayer, in honor of the Holy Martyrs, prays the following:



O Lord our God, You are faithful in Your words and You never lie in Your promises; You granted Your holy Martyrs to fight the good fight and to finish the course of godliness and to keep the faith of the true confession. All-holy Lord, be entreated by their prayers and grant us, Your unworthy servants, to have a part and inheritance with them, that being imitators of them, we too may obtain the good things that await them. By the mercy and love for mankind of Your only-begotten Son, with whom You are blessed, together with Your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

The hierarchy censes the relics and then raises the Holy Paten containing them up to begin the procession. The procession is led by the acolytes, followed by the choirs, the clergy, the hierarchy carrying the Holy Relics, and finally all the faithful, leaving the Church empty. As the procession leaves the Church, the choirs sing hymns honoring the Holy Martyrs:

Hear us, you martyred Saints, who have fought the good fight and have

gained crowns. Entreat the Lord to shed His tender mercy on our souls.

Glory to You, O Christ our God, Your Apostles' proudest boast. The treasure of Your Martyrs' joy, who to all proclaimed the Trinity one in essence.

These hymns are two of the three hymns also chanted at weddings and ordinations. Following those hymns, others are offered that are only ever used for Consecrations:

Be consecrated, be consecrated, O new Jerusalem, for your light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. This house was built by the Father; this house was made firm by the Son; this house was renewed by the Holy Spirit, which illumines and supports, and sanctifies our souls.

In the Old Testament, when the Temple was consecrated, Solomon offered sacrifices of irrational animals and whole-burnt offerings, O Lord. Since You, O Savior, were well pleased that the types should cease and the truth be known, now the whole world offers bloodless



PLACING AND SEALING THE HOLY RELICS

sacrifices to Your glory; for as the Lord of all, by Your Holy Spirit You sanctify everything.

Consecration is an old honored custom, and a good one. And it is also proper to honor new churches through consecration. As Isaiah says, islands will be dedicated to God, which are to be understood as the churches of the Gentiles, which have recently been established, and have their sturdy construction by God. Therefore let us also spiritually celebrate the festival of the present Consecration.

HIGHLIGHTS

The many actions that take place during the Consecration Service are not only beautifully symbolic, but deeply theological, historic and meaningful. Here are some of the highlights.

1. The Three Processions around the Church Building.

Those in attendance process with the hierarchy and the Holy Relics around the church three times. By circling the Church three times, we circumscribe a border around the building, and

declare that this Church is set apart for God. This tradition is as ancient as Joshua's Battle of Jericho. God promised the city of Jericho to His people, though at the time it was occupied by other people. The chief captain of the host of the Lord, a great angel, took back this territory, consecrating it to our Lord. During the Consecration Service the faithful process as Joshua and his people did, circling the walls of the Church and declaring the land for God.

When the first procession reaches the front of the Church, the hierarchy places the Holy Relics on a table, which has been previously placed there, and the first readings from the Bible follow. After the readings, the hierarchy picks up the Holy Paten and the second procession around the Church takes place with hymns being chanted. After the second and third processions, additional readings are offered.

2. The Entrance into the Church

Following the third procession around the Church, the hierarchy, raising his hierarchical staff, knocks on the closed front doors of the Church,

calling out in a loud voice: "Lift up your gates you rulers; and be lifted up you eternal gates, and the King of glory will enter." From inside the Church and behind the closed doors a voice answers, "Who is this king of glory?" The hierarchy replies, "The Lord mighty and powerful, the Lord powerful in war." And again, he repeats, "Lift up your gates you rulers; and be lifted up you eternal gates, and the King of glory will enter." Again, the voice asks, "Who is this king of glory?" and the hierarchy answers, "The Lord mighty and powerful, the Lord powerful in war." This exchange is repeated a third time in dramatic fashion.

At the third answer the hierarchy once again lifts the Holy Relics from the table and makes the sign of the Cross with them three times before the closed doors. The doors are then opened and the hierarchy leads the clergy and faithful into the Church, while this special hymn is chanted:

You have made the earthly beauty of the holy tabernacle of Your glory to be like the majesty of the firmament on high, O Lord. Make it strong forever and ever, and accept our supplications that we unceasingly bring to You there, at the intercession of the Theotokos. For You are the life and resurrection of all.

3. The Placing and Sealing of the Holy Relics in the Holy Altar Table.

The hierarchy enters carrying the Holy Relics and proceeds to the Holy Altar Table. All the faithful follow. Uncovering the Paten, he places the Holy Relics in a small box. He then pours Holy Chrism over the Relics; this act symbolizes the union between our Lord, and His Martyrs. Having done this the hierarchy prays for the deceased founders of the Church.



WASHING THE HOLY ALTAR TABLE

In the early years of Christianity the Church was not allowed to exist; for many years the early Christians were persecuted and killed for their faith in Christ. In those days, the Christians met in underground burial places and celebrated the Eucharist on the graves of the martyred Saints. When the persecutions ended, and the Church was free to exist, the custom of celebrating the Eucharist over the graves of Martyrs continued by placing Holy Relics in the Altar at the time of the Consecration. In this manner, we are always reminded that the Church was built on the Blood of the Martyrs and their faith in the Lord.

Following these two prayers the hierarch places the box containing the Holy relics into a special cavity in the Holy Altar Table. In order to seal them permanently the hierarch pours wax/mastic over them. The wax/mastic contains many sweet smelling and fragrant spices, which were used by Joseph of Arimathea and Nikodemus to anoint the Body of Christ in preparation for his burial. The Holy Altar represents the Tomb in which our Lord's body was placed. All of this takes place during the chanting or

reading of Psalm 144 (145).

Together with the saints' Holy Relics, a scroll listing the names of all those who pledged in support of the building of the Church are sealed in the Holy Altar forever. The Consecration is the "Baptism" of a Church, and in it each of us reaffirms our own Baptism, our own dying and living with Christ. Therefore, on the day of Consecration, the Church "entombs" with our Lord, through the interment of the names, our loved ones, past and present, all of whom are alive together in Christ.

4. The Washing and Anointing of the Altar Table.

The hierarch's robes are then covered with a simple white linen tunic called the Savanon, which represents both a baptismal garment and the shroud in which our Lord was buried, as he prepared to clean the Altar Table. The Altar Table represents the Tomb of Christ and His body lies therein. The Altar must undergo its own "Baptism" (washing) and "Chrismation" (anointing). The hierarch is given three bars of soap and a basin of water, which he blessed to make it

Holy Water (much like the blessing of waters in Baptism). As he cleans, he chants from Psalm 50/51, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Fill me with joy and gladness; let the bones which You have broken rejoice." Later, this special white garment will be cut up into small pieces and offered to the faithful as a blessing from the service to take to their homes.

After the Altar Table is cleaned, he marked the sign of the Cross in water over it three times (as when a person is immersed into the water three times in Baptism). He then makes the sign of the Cross with Holy Chrism over the Altar three times, calling out each time, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!" (as when a person is Chrismated.) Psalm 132 (133) is then read, which reminds us that when Aaron was chosen by the Lord and anointed, the oil flowed over him and into his beard. The Holy Altar Table is then dried with special engraved cloths which will be used to make Holy Antiminsia, or sacred liturgical cloths to be distributed to other churches by the hierarch.



THE ANTEMINSIA CLOTHS



VESTING THE HOLY ALTAR TABLE

5. The Placing of the new Altar Coverings and other Holy Articles on the Holy Table.

On the four corners of the Holy Altar Table, icons of the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are then placed and sealed with wax. The Altar Table is then covered with the "Katasarkion". This white linen cloth represents the Lord's burial shroud. The Katasarkion is tied with a cord which represents the cord with which our Lord's hands were tied as He stood before the High Priests. The Katasarkion will never be removed and will remain on the Altar for as long as the Church remains standing. As the Katasarkion is being placed on the Altar, Psalm 131 (132) is read. Having placed the Katasarkion over the Altar, the hierarch says: "Glory to You our God unto ages of ages." He washes his hands, and covers the Altar Table with a set of new, brighter and more elaborate Altar vestments, which symbolize the glory of God. While he covers the Altar Table, the reader reads Psalm 92 (93): "The Lord reigns; He clothed Himself with majesty; the Lord clothed and girded Himself with power; and He

established the world, which shall not be moved. Your throne is prepared from of old; You are from everlasting."

After the vesting of the Holy Altar Table, the hierarch censes the Holy Altar and the Church. He then Chrismates the icons and the building; carrying a reed to the tip of which has been bound a small sponge dipped in Holy Chrism. He draws the monogram of Christ in the apse of the Sanctuary, on the four columns and on the lintel of the door



ANOINTING THE HOLY ICONS

of the Church on the inside.

6. The Lighting of the Vigil Light.

Finally, at the conclusion of the Consecration service, the hierarch places the Vigil Light on the Holy Altar. This light reminds us of the unfailing light of our Transfigured Christ in His Holy Resurrection (and of the candle that a newly Baptized & Chrismated person carries). Earlier in the service everyone in the congregation has had an opportunity to offer a drop of oil to the holy vigil lamp, making it an offering of thanks and prayerful vigilance of all the people of God.

7. The first Divine Liturgy in the newly consecrated Church.

The celebration of the first Divine Liturgy in the newly-consecrated Church continues with great joy as the people of the Church offer their thanks to God and offer themselves to His service. The Consecration of a Church is not an end; like a Baptism is the start of a new life in Christ for the entire community. To God be the glory! Amen. ❖

Text resources for this article drawn from St. Barbara Church (Orange, CT) and Father Seraphim Dedes.