

The Weekday Services of Great Lent

Great Compline – The service of Compline is normally a “bedtime prayer”. Great Compline is one of two services, the other being “Little Compline” which is an abridged version of the greater service. The service in general reminds us of the brevity of our life on earth and the coming judgment. The Lenten character and tone of the Great Compline service can be heard in the prayers, which beg God’s forgiveness for our shortcomings, and petition His pardon, mercy, and pleasure. It is a service that is repeated on the first four nights of Great Lent when *The Canon of St. Andrew of Crete* is sung within Compline (divided into four parts for the four nights; and done in its entirety on the Fifth Thursday of Great Lent). Within the canon one prays the repetitive refrain, “Have mercy upon me, O God, have mercy upon me,” in a prolonged confession of sin and unremitting call to repentance. At the same time the Canon is a meditation on the whole body of Scripture, embracing all sinners and righteous persons from the beginning of the world to the return of Christ. In a skillfully Byzantine fashion, the events of sacred history are revisited as events of *my* life; God’s acts in the past as acts aimed at *me*, and *my* salvation, the tragedy of sin and betrayal as *my* personal tragedy (see Great Lent, Schmemmann).

The Liturgy of Pre-Sanctified Gifts – This service is most commonly celebrated on the Wednesday evenings of the Great Fast (in Byzantine churches) and also on Friday evenings (in Slavic churches). The service is also prescribed for the first three days of Holy Week (when it is scheduled in the morning). The Pre-Sanctified Liturgy includes no consecration (of the bread and wine into Christ’s Body and Blood), but uses the consecrated elements reserved from the previous Sunday for those who are prepared to receive the Sacrament on weekdays. The evening Liturgy begins with elements of the Vespers service and the first part of the Divine Liturgy, ending just before the beginning of the Cherubic Hymn. This Liturgy has its ancient origins in the Church’s early practice of promoting frequent Communion. It was a response to the ancient fasting practice of the Church, which found it

inappropriate to *celebrate* the consecration of the Eucharist (synonymous with feasting) on days assigned for strict fasting. Thus emerged the Church’s liturgical response to honor the solemnity of fasting with the pastoral need for providing frequent Communion – the Liturgy of Pre-Sanctified Gifts (see Great Week and Pascha, Calivas). The prayers are generally attributed to *St. Gregory Dialogos*, the Pope of Rome (540-604AD).

The “Akathist” (*Greek for “standing up”*) or **“Madeyeh”** (*Arabic*) **Hymn** – This service is a long poem prefaced by a hymn in honor of the Virgin Mary, and has a long-standing tradition among the Orthodox faithful. The Akathist Hymn was written to honor the Virgin Mary, who was considered to be the protector of the great City of Constantinople. In Byzantine churches, the hymn is sung in four sections within the body of Little Compline on four Friday nights of the Great Fast, and in its entirety on the final fifth Friday evening. [In Slavic churches The Liturgy of Pre-Sanctified Gifts is served on the Fridays of Great Lent, and the entire *Akathist Hymn* is sung on the fifth Saturday of the Lenten period.] The Akathist Hymn is not a Lenten service *per se*, but is tied to the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25th), often celebrated within the Fast. On the Sundays of Great Lent the *Kontakion* (Hymn) of the Feast of the Annunciation is sung. It is obvious from the words at the start of the Kontakion, “To thee, O champion leader...” that the hymn is closely connected with the siege of the city of Constantinople and its subsequent liberation ascribed to the intervention of the Virgin Mary. The name “Akathist” signifies the fact that people listen to it standing up. Most scholars ascribe its authorship to Patriarch Germanos I (715-730AD). It was translated into Latin in the year 800, and was also translated into Italian, Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Turkish, Modern Greek, and English. Generally speaking, the hymn is a prayer for the intercessory role of the Virgin for personal spiritual circumstances, group trials and tribulations. The ongoing threat of all forms of terror makes this service very pertinent to the lives of all peace-loving people.