

Q. I've noticed that while we sing the creed during the divine liturgy, the priest waves a piece of cloth over the gifts. What's going on there? I've heard that it was done at one time to keep flies from landing on the altar. Is this true? Does this mean it shouldn't be done anymore?

Also, why does the deacon say "The doors! The doors!" and "Let all catechumens depart!" I've noticed that no one leaves at this time.

A. These are not silly questions but are the very kinds of things that come up regularly in catechumen classes.

There were many practices of the primitive Church, such as the way in which the Holy Gospel was brought forth with torches from its safe hiding place or the way in which the people offered gifts of food and the Deacons prepared the Lytia meal and the Holy Gifts from among these offerings, which, while rich in tradition and significance, were gestures which were difficult to transfer into a liturgical context in which hundreds and even thousands of worshippers were gathered in one place. Thus, the simple torchlight procession of the Gospel, after several intermediate stages, among which was one in which the entire congregation remained outside of the Temple until the entrance of the Hierarch accompanied by the Clergy and the Holy Gospel, became what we now have as the Little Entrance.

Anyway, as I was saying, the effort was not one of trying to make the Divine Liturgy snazzier and innovative but rather a question of how to draw the entire congregation into what had once been a more or less intimate act of corporate worship. In developing a liturgical milieu appropriate to the mysteries of Christ, the Church, naturally, applied three elements: the original ritualistically elaborate but less ceremonial worship of the 1st-3rd century catacomb and domestic Church gathering, elements of Jewish Temple and Synagogue worship which had been the core of prayer life at the time Our Lord's advent, and, finally, certain elements of public and civic life which were "Transfigured" by the Christianization of the population.

It was only reasonable, for example, that the simple peasant clothing of the early Christian Clergy, the Tunic, Phelonian, Dalmatic shirt and various kinds of servile Stoles, should come to be bordered and adorned with embroidered crosses and rich decoration and to imitate more and more the apparel of the Imperial Court. After all, Christ is the True King, His Holy Table is the True Throne and His Temple, (Basilica) is the True Heavenly Imperial Court on Earth.

Now, we know that ritual fans, usually of large plumes, were used at royal courts from Egypt and Persia to China and Rome itself. These fans had the triple purpose of honoring the person over whom they were waved, of discouraging the lighting of insect pests upon his or her honored personage and, of course, of cooling that person. When these fans were made of Peacock tail feathers, they also resembled the Firey Seraphim, "Covered with eyes, within and without", who

surrounded the throne of God in Heaven and, whose images had overshadowed the ark in the Jerusalem Temple. Fanning the Gifts at the Divine Liturgy became so much a part of the Deacon's office that presentation of the liturgical fan, now usually made of metal and emblazoned with the images of Cherubim and Seraphim, and his use of that fan to "Fan the Holy Gifts" is an important part of the ordination of Deacons to this day.

The Veil, however, is a different matter. Rather than having developed, it seems to have been used by Christians in those places where they had permanent worship spaces, from the earliest times. The aer or large chalice veil to which you refer, developed in its present form over time but seems to be simply a smaller form of the Altar Veil or curtain. Like the Altar veil, it is drawn back as was the stone from the already empty tomb to reveal the mystery that is taking place. (It is important to note that in this context and every other context in which veiling is practiced in our liturgical tradition it is to honor the thing which is veiled not to "Hide" it.)

Now, the idea that the priest waves the aer over the holy gifts to "Keep away insects" is not terribly likely in as much as the Creed itself (The Symbol of Faith) while part of the Baptismal Service was not a part of the Divine Liturgy until much later and, by that time, the fanning of the Holy Gifts with the aer seems to have been a gesture understood primarily as honoring them and as a type or image of the Holy Spirit of God Who, like a dove, hovered over and sanctified them as well as of the Holy Angels who overshadowed them and of the Contrite Christian Soul trembling before them. This is especially represented and common celebrations of the Divine Liturgy at which the concelebrants with great ceremony share in waving the aer over the gifts and especially in Hierarchical celebrations where the veil is waved not only over the Holy Gifts but over the bowed head of the hierarch. This is a clear type of the descent of the Spirit.

Much more could be said but suffice it to say that there are two dangers in explaining the actions and ceremonies of the Divine Liturgy. Some are tempted to allegorize and to interpret every minute action in a symbolic way which transfers the meaning from mystery to its component actions. On the other hand, some practice a kind of deconstructionist reductionism in which they deny altogether the action of Gods Holy Spirit it bringing our Orthodox Liturgical tradition to its present state of perfection. Neither of the positions: the cultic or the quasi Protestant, are very productive for the life of the Church. I remember having heard Fr. Alexander Schmemmann ask a young priest why he was serving the Divine Liturgy in an unusual way. "Oh!" said the neophyte, "But Father Alexander, you taught us that this practice is very ancient." "Yes!" said the Professor, "And did it occur to you that the Holy Spirit had some reason to get rid of it?"

The point is that what is alive and practiced is what God and the Church have found sacred and edifying. For us to take it upon our selves to add to or subtract from this deposit because it, "doesn't seem to have meaning for us" is the height of arrogance and presumption.

Now, very briefly, to your question about the dismissal of catechumens: While we do not usually require the actual departure of catechumens, we continue to dismiss them with prayer as a sign to them that their entrance into a rightful place in the Eucharistic synaxis yet awaits them. Many of

our Catechumens over the decades here in Denver, have expressed gratitude both for the prayer and for the implied invitation which the dismissal bespeaks. An invitation to persevere in their training. But, when I think about this question, I recall a sermon preached by St. Tikhon of Moscow in answer to those who asked, "Why can't we drop the catechumen Litany and dismissal from the Liturgy". "You want to omit the catechumen prayers. You say that they take time and that we, after all, have no catechumens anymore. Well, how much time do these prayers really take? Also, I suggest that if you do not pray for the catechumens you will not ever have them".

When the Deacon says "The doors, the doors..." we may no longer expect the Pagans to try to burst through and disrupt our services but it has only been for a very brief time and in a very few places that this security is felt by large numbers of Orthodox believers. We must not forget that we are all called upon even today to be stewards and defenders of the Mysteries of Christ and that we may very soon find ourselves once more under attack from those to whom we should not communicate Christ's Mysteries.

This is a paraphrase but it is as I recall it and it answers, I believe, your second question totally and concisely.