

## **The Consecration of a Church**

The Consecration of a Church (Εγκαινία Ναου) is the service of sanctification and solemn dedication of a building for use as a Church. The consecration of a Church is a complex service that is filled with profound symbolisms. Many biblical elements are taken from the Old Testament: the Consecration of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40) and of the Temple of Solomon (1 Kings 8; 2 Chronicles 5-7).

### **Background**

Once a building has been consecrated as a Church it may not be used again for a secular purpose. Before construction of a new building as a Church, the local diocesan bishop must bless the endeavor. Before construction begins, the bishop lays a foundation stone that may or may not contain relics of a saint. After construction of the new Church has been completed the building can be consecrated.

The consecration is usually performed by the diocesan bishop. While the consecration encompasses the whole Church, the ceremony centers around the holy altar and holy altar table in particular. As salvation for an Orthodox Christian is union with Christ, called Life in Christ, the center of this Life in Christ is the holy altar, the consecration of a Church is, in effect, the baptism and chrismation of the Church.

### **Preparations**

In preparation for the consecration, the altar table is cleared, leaving it uncovered with nothing on it. The consecration begins with the celebration of Great Vespers on the eve of the consecration service. At this time, the bishop brings to the Church the relics of the saints that will be placed inside the altar table. The Vespers service is dedicated to the martyrs and the patron of the Church.

### **Consecration**

On the day of the consecration, the service begins with a special Orthros service, again, dedicated to the martyrs and the patron of the Church. The martyrs are considered especially important in the consecration service, because the original churches were built around the tombs of the Martyrs. We call into remembrance the ultimate sacrifice of the martyrs on which the Church as a whole is founded.

### **Processions**

The service of the consecration begins after the Orthros with reading of Psalm 143, followed by reciting of petitions and prayers. The people, singers, and priests led by the bishop, who carries a diskos on which the holy relics have been placed, make a procession around the Church three times, reminiscent of the three processions around the font at baptism. Each time the procession reaches the front of the Church, the bishop places the diskos with the holy relics on a table placed there earlier and reads from the Holy Scriptures.

After the third procession is completed, the bishop chants a dialogue from Psalm 24 as he enters the Church; this represents Christ the King entering and taking over the building by defeating the power of the devil. After the dialogue is completed the bishop, holding the diskos on which are the holy relics, makes the sign of the cross and enters the Church.

### **Sealing of the holy relics**

In the early days of Christianity when the Church was heavily persecuted, the Christians met in underground burial places where they celebrated the Eucharist on the graves of martyred saints. After the Church was recognized this custom was continued by placing relics in the altar table during the consecration of the Church. This is a reminder that the Church was built on the blood of the martyrs and their faith in the Lord.

After the bishop has entered the Church, he continues into the altar. In the altar he places the diskos on the altar table. There he removes the relics and places them in a small box. The bishop then pours holy chrism over the relics, symbolizing the union between our Lord and his martyrs. With prayers and the reading of Psalm 145, the bishop then places the box with the relics in a cavity in the altar table where it is sealed in with a wax/mastic that contains fragrant spices as were used by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to anoint our Lord's body before his burial. In this, the holy altar represents Christ's tomb.

### **Washing and anointing the altar table**

After placing the relics in the altar table, the bishop proceeds to the washing and anointing of the altar table. For this purpose the bishop is vested in a special white linen garment over his vestments called a savanon. The "baptism" of the altar table begins with the prayer of consecration by the bishop, followed by petitions by the deacon. The bishop then is given a basin of water and, with a blessing and prayer, pours the water over the table three times and washes it while Psalm 84 is read. Symbolizing baptism, the table is cleaned by washing and made holy by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

After the table is dried, the bishop sprinkles rosewater on it and continues reading Psalm 51. The assisting priests then dry the table with the antiminsion. Having anointed the table with chrism, once in the center and on each side, the bishop proceeds to spread the chrism over all the table while reciting a section of Psalm 133. The excess chrism is wiped off by the priests with the antiminsion, and icons of the four Evangelists are fastened, one at each corner, to the altar table.

#### **Vesting the altar table**

While Psalm 132 is read, a white linen cloth, representing the Lord's burial shroud, is laid over the altar table. The cloth, called the katasarkion, is tied on the table with a cord that represents the cord with which our Lord's hands were tied when he stood before the high priests. The katasarkion is permanently installed, to remain as long as the Church stands. After washing his hands, the bishop now covers the altar table with a more ornate cover, the endyton, that symbolizes the glory of God, and places the other holy articles, including the antimins, Gospel Book, the artophorion, and candle sticks, on the altar table, as the reader reads Psalm 93.

#### **Anointing the Church and conclusion**

After the altar has been consecrated, sanctified, and adorned, the entire Church is censed while Psalm 26 is read. Then, the bishop anoints with holy chrism the four walls of the Church and holy icons, making the sign of the cross on each with the chrism. The bishop then offers prayers for the altar, Church, and faithful and places a lighted vigil light on the altar table. As the consecration service comes to an end, the bishop removes the savanon he is wearing and offers it to be cut up into small pieces that are given to each person in Church. Concluding prayers are then offered and the first Divine Liturgy in the newly consecrated church is celebrated.

*From: [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Consecration\\_of\\_a\\_church](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Consecration_of_a_church)*