

The Altar and Its Furnishings

The Altar which lies beyond the Iconostasis, is set aside for those who perform the Divine services, and normally persons not consecrated to the service of the Church are not permitted to enter. Occupying the central place in the Altar is the Holy Table (Russian Prestol), which represents the Throne of God, with the Lord Himself invisibly present there. It also represents the Tomb of Christ, since His Body (the Holy Gifts) is placed there. The Holy Table is square in shape and is covered by two coverings. The first, inner covering, is of white linen, representing the winding-sheet in which the Body of the Lord was wrapped. The outer cloth is made of rich and bright material, representing the glory of God's Throne. Both cloths cover the Holy Table to the ground.

Antimension.

In the first centuries of Christianity, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated on the tombs of the Martyrs and this was celebrated by the Bishop. Later, as the Church expanded and the size of a typical Diocese with it, the Bishops of the early Church began to ordain Priests as their representatives to the growing number of Christian communities. Only with the Bishop's permission could a community and its Priest serve the Liturgy and the same holds true today. One of the vehicles by which these important ancient practices are effected today is a simple piece of cloth, folded within another, and resting always on the Holy Table of every Orthodox church the Antimension.

The Antimension is a rectangular piece of cloth, gold in color, measuring about 18 by 24 inches, and while on the Holy Table it is folded within another cloth, red in color, called the Iliton, which represents the swaddling clothes and the burial shroud of Jesus Christ. Depicted on the top of the Antimension is an Icon of the Burial of Christ, along with Icons of the four Evangelists, as well as Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, for whom the usual Divine Liturgies are named. Sewn into every Antimension is an incorruptible relic of a Saint, making real the early liturgical connection with the Martyrs who died rather than renounce Christ, and whose blood, after the Blood of Christ, formed the very foundation of the Church.

Printed on every Antimension are the words: By the grace of the All-Holy, Life-giving Spirit, this Antimension, the Holy Table, is consecrated for the Offering on it of the Body and Blood of our Lord in the Divine Liturgy. Each one is signed by the ruling Bishop of the Diocese and placed on the Holy Table, constituting his permission for the community to exist as an Orthodox parish and to celebrate the Liturgy. This is so, since true Christianity has always held that without the Bishop there is no Church and through the Bishop comes our unity of Faith and Communion which is Orthodoxy.

The word Antimension is a combination of Greek and Latin which means in place of the table. While Holy Tables were always to have been consecrated and relics placed inside of them, it was not always possible for the Bishop to visit each community to do so. For that reason, Bishops consecrated cloths or boards and sent them to each community to be used in place of the consecrated Holy Table. This also allowed for portable Holy Tables for travelers. The use of the Antimension is mandatory, even on Holy Tables which have been consecrated, and a Priest is not permitted to celebrate the Divine Liturgy without it. Military Chaplains and Missionaries also use it instead of the table when serving in remote areas.

Also placed on the Holy Table are two indispensable items: the Cross and the Book of the Gospels. The Cross is placed there both as a sign of Christ's victory over the Devil and of our deliverance. Since the Lamb of God was slain on the Cross for our salvation, it is especially appropriate that it be placed upon the Holy Table where the Bloodless Sacrifice is offered on behalf of all and for all. As it is the Word of God, the Book of the Holy Gospels is placed on the Holy Table, signifying that God is mystically present. It is usually richly-adorned and as it is the Book of Life, its Governing may not be of the skins of dead animals (i.e., leather), but is usually made of precious metals adorned with jewels. At the center of the cover is usually represented Christ, with the four Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John at the four corners.

As the Holy Table represents the sepulcher of the Lord, upon it, at the rear, is placed the Ark (or Tabernacle), so-called because of its general shape, within which are placed the Holy Gifts (Reserved Sacrament) used for the Communion of the sick. Candlesticks are also placed on the Holy Table, signifying the Light of Christ which illumines the world.

In addition to the above, a natural (not artificial) Sponge is usually placed beside the Antimension with which to brush off the particles from the Paten into the Chalice. Also found is a vessel containing the Holy Chrism used for Chrismation, and also a Sick-Call Kit (the Ciborium) within which are to be found a small chest for the Holy Gifts, a small Chalice and Spoon, a small vessel for wine and a sponge to clean the Chalice with. In addition, a small chest, called the Artophorion is placed on the Holy Table during Great Lent, within which is placed the consecrated Lamb (s) used for the Presanctified Liturgy (if the same is not placed in the Tabernacle). Often a canopy is suspended over the Holy Table, representing the heavens over the earth, from which is suspended a dove with outstretched wings (the Fix), representing the Holy Spirit. (In many places, the pre-sanctified Lamb was placed in the Fix during Great Lent.)

Behind the Holy Table a seven-branched Candlestick is usually placed (seven being the sacred number), and sometimes a large Processional Cross. Behind this, at the extreme East end of the Altar is a raised place, called the High Place (or Bema), upon which is placed the Cathedra (Bishop's Throne), with seats for the Priests on either side. During the Liturgy, the Priests (representing the Holy Apostles) sit at either side of the Bishop (representing the King of Glory). [In modern times, the Cathedra is usually found only in Cathedrals and large Monasteries.]

On either side of the Bishop's Throne are placed ceremonial Fans, with which, in ancient times, the Holy Gifts were fanned to keep away insects. Now they are carried in solemn processions, signifying the six-winged Seraphim who minister at the Divine services, and who are represented iconographically upon them. Above the High Place is an Icon of the Savior and on both sides Icons of the Holy Apostles or (more often) Holy Bishops. Before the Icon of the Savior is suspended a lampada, called the High Light.