

A Guide for Readers in the Orthodox Church



Father Geoffrey Korz

+

A Guide for Readers in the Orthodox Church

This small book is written with the purpose of providing some small guidance to the prayerful exercise of the duties of a Reader in the Church.

The holy order of the Reader upholds the spiritual responsibility for the care of the spoken words or Holy Scripture. In societies where most people are unable to read the Scriptures, the office of the Reader provides the most regular exposure to the Word of God outside the Gospel and Epistle readings. In societies where literacy has flooded the human heart and mind with disharmony, noise, and confusion, the sacred responsibilities of the Reader are even more critical, since by the prayerful and holy exercise of his ministerial responsibilities, the Reader offers the Holy Scriptures as a correcting balm, and a healing of the spiritual hearts of the faithful.

This is a critical and sacred responsibility, which cannot be undertaken lightly without being an offense to Christ. Undertaken with humility, care, and love, the order of the Reader is a great blessing to the faithful of the Church, and to the salvation of the soul of the Reader himself.

Although this book is written primarily with the tonsured Reader in mind, much of its contents are applicable for the lay reader in a parish or monastery setting.

May Our Lord Jesus Christ bless, through the use of this book, those who labour in His Holy Church.

I - The Foundations

The foundation of the life of a Reader must be prayer and Holy Scripture. On his tonsuring, a Reader takes a vow to read the scriptures every day, that his heart may be shaped by the words of Christ, and not by mere externals of life.

Along with reading, a Reader's life must be immersed in prayer. The rank of Reader is the first rank of the priesthood, and it shares in the common work of the priesthood: to pray for the needs of the world.

A Reader should prepare himself for service in the Church through daily prayer. The daily use of the following prayers is not only spiritually edifying, but is also essential in building up the necessary skills to read in Church.

As a beginning, the following prayers should be known by heart, and easily repeated without use of the written text:

1. The **Trisagion Prayer** from "O Heavenly King" through to the end of "O Come, Let Us Worship", including their abbreviated notation in the liturgical text (see the section "*Abbreviations*", below)
2. The **Theotokion**, "It is Truly Meet".
3. The **Creed**.
4. The **Troparion of Pascha**, "Christ is Risen...", used in place of "O Heavenly King..." and at other times during the Paschal season.

It is advisable to stick with the version you have committed to

memory, regardless of what the text in front of you says. Using a variety of texts is disruptive to both personal familiarity and memory, as well as to the familiarity that allows one to pray from the heart with sincerity.

A Reader must also be familiar with the following terms:

1. **TONE** - this refers to the melody used during a particular week. There are eight tones; the tone of the week in to be found on most Church calendars. Other tones are also used for various hymns.
2. **TROPARION and KONTAKION** - these refer to special hymns used for every feast day. Each feast day, and each saint, has their own troparion and kontakion (they come in "sets" of two; the troparion is almost always sung first). Despite the fact that there are thousands of troparia and kontakia, they are all sung to one of the eight tones; thus, while the words change, the music remains the same.

A Reader must also be familiar with the following books, used in the Church:

1. **THE HOROLOGION (Book of the Hours)**: This contains the services of the Hours, as well as the Troparia and Kontakia for certain feast days, as well as other services, and sometimes short lives of the saints and descriptions of the feast. (A full version is often called *The Great Horologion*). *This will be used every week.*
2. **THE EPISTLE (or APOSTOL)**. This book contains the readings from the Epistle for every day of the year. At the back of the book, the appropriate Prokemenia and Alleluia verses are also listed. The reading for the day and the Prokemenon/Alleluia should be marked separately. *This will be used every week.*

3. **THE MENAION (Book of the Months):** This contains the weekly verses for Vespers and Matins for particular saints and feasts. It usually comes in twelve volumes. *This will usually be used exclusively by the choir or chanters.*
4. **THE LENTEN TRIODION:** This book contains the verses for all the services of Vespers, Matins, etc. from the first Sundays approaching Pascha, right through Great Lent, Holy Week, and Holy Pascha itself. *It will be thoroughly used during this season, and not used at all the rest of the year.*
5. **THE PENTECOSTARION:** This contains the Troparia and Kontakia, as well as the Vespers and Matins verses for the services from Pascha to Pentecost. *It will be thoroughly used during this season, and not used at all the rest of the year.*

Care of Liturgical Books

The Reader has the primary responsibility for the physical care of liturgical books. Most liturgical books are crafted with solid construction, offering a long lifetime of use, provided the books are given proper care. The following points should be observed:

1. Copies of the Holy Scriptures should be placed only on the top of any pile, and at the right end of any shelf for storage. This reflects pious reverence for the Scriptures, as well as ease of access that should be a natural part of Orthodox life.
2. The pages of liturgical books should only be handled with clean hands.
3. Every care should be taken to avoid folding or crumpling the pages of a liturgical book. In transporting a book, this

involves either transporting the book flat, inside a hard case. If the book must be transported in a soft sided case in vertical position, it should be placed spine down, with nothing on top, ideally with other books on either side to ensure it stays closed. A ribbon or tie around the book can be used to secure the book to prevent it falling open, although care must be taken to avoid damaging the pages.

Conduct of a Reader

As the first rank of the clergy, a Reader should conduct himself with the humility, sobriety, and care appropriate to his order. Outside the Church, a Reader should exercise care to speak and act with Christian love and dignity, and to avoid activities that even give the appearance of behaviour unbecoming to a member of the clergy, such as drinking to excess, riotous laughter and parties, and frequenting places of a dubious or sinful character. In all these things, a Reader should exercise modesty in his decisions, reflecting on his own sins alone, never giving even the appearance of condemning others.

While a Reader would ideally wear clerical attire at all times, it is at minimum necessary that a Reader should wear a cassock on Church grounds, and at any Church functions off Church grounds. Clothing worn beneath the cassock should be clean and neat, and avoid patterns or bright colours (black or white shirts are ideal; dark pants, shoes, and socks are appropriate).

It is not appropriate to wear shorts or ties under a cassock at any time. (Saint John Maximovich used to send out of the altar anyone wearing a tie under his vestments: he argued that ties were items of fashion, too frivolous for the Church, and that they resembled the noose with which Judas took his own life).

Cassocks should be laundered at least every few weeks; they are

an article of clothing, not a coat, and should be treated with the dignity that marks them as the garment of a member of the clergy.

II - In and Around the Church

The Church is the Temple of God: it is not a theatre, a racetrack, a gymnasium, or a legion hall. As such, certain behaviour is proper and becoming in Church, which may require an initial and extra effort necessary to form a habit of conduct:

1. **All movements within the Church are purposeful.** One must avoid running, or even rushing about, as this can cause confusion, accidents, or even sacrilege toward the Holy Mysteries or the Holy Place.
2. **All speech within the Church is purposeful.** Any talking within the Church, and especially within the Altar area, should only be concerned with the conduct of the holy services. If it is necessary to conduct a conversation on another matter, take the conversation outside, into an adjoining room, such as an office (the sacristy is part of the Church, and should be treated as such for these purposes).

Speaking within the altar should always be done with reverence for the Holy Things, *sotto voce* (with a soft voice). If mistakes are made, or accidents should occur, one should avoid exclamations, loud apologies, etc., but instead strive to proceed smoothly and deliberately with the task at hand. Similarly, yelling or argumentativeness must be

avoided, and while correction may be necessary, this must be done with discretion and gentleness.

If the priest offers correction during a service, this should be accepted without any visible indication of dissent or disagreement. It is the ultimate responsibility of the priest to ensure liturgical order, and every effort must be made to avoid conflicts during services. Such issues are appropriately addressed in private, outside the service, and in a timely fashion.

3. **It is never appropriate to joke, laugh, whistle, applaud, or sing secular songs within the Church.** While all these things have their good and joyful place in the Christian life, they undermine the prayerfulness of the holy place, and as such, should be avoided in the Church.
4. **All sound within the Church is moderate.** Reading should be clear and audible to all, neither forced nor muttered. Reading should take a moderate pace, neither plodding nor rushed. If words cannot be distinctly heard, the reading is too fast. Similarly, if words are slurred together, the meaning can be distorted.

Often, the priest will be reading silent prayers at the same time the Reader is reading prayers aloud; these prayers are usually of complimentary length. As such, if the Reader rushes his prayers, there can be long, silent gaps while the priest finishes his prayers (such as during the silent prayers read at the Psalms at Matins or Vespers). Such gaps should be avoided, and it is up to the Reader to match the familiar pace of the priest, not vice-versa.

5. **The pace of reading should be even throughout;** one section should not be faster than another. If in offering his prayers aloud during a part of a service when a Reader is

reading, the Reader should pay attention to his pace: if the priest's responses are somewhat exaggerated in their slowness or in their speed, this may be an indication that the reader should slow down or speed up, respectively. It is wise to clarify this question on a regular basis.

6. **Chanting (of Psalms, for example) should be intoned in a relative monotone, with limited expressiveness of voice.**

The use of expression in the human voice draws the attention of the listener to the voice itself, rather than to the words spoken. Excessive expressiveness is a distraction from prayerfulness, and should be avoided.

7. **Singing and chanting should be clear and harmonious.**

When multiple voices are singing, every effort should be made to have the voices blend into a single voice: ideally, no individual voice should be able to be distinguished from the whole.

III - Preparation for Services

Arrival

The Reader should arrive no later than thirty minutes before the service is scheduled to begin, or earlier if he has other responsibilities. Upon arrival, the Reader should:

1. Make three bows before the doors of the Church, and pray: “I shall enter Thy house in the multitude of Thy mercy, in fear I shall worship toward Thy holy temple.”
2. Upon entering the nave, venerate the icons.
3. Upon entering the altar, make three large prostrations to the ground at the side of the altar (except during the Paschal season, in which one may make three small prostrations from the waist). Only a bishop, priest, deacon, or subdeacon may touch the Holy Altar or Table of Preparation.

Preparing the Books

Long before the service is about to start, the Reader should check the liturgical books for the following:

1. **Check the Date** (if the Old Calendar is used, double check to ensure the accurate Church calendar date is known).
2. **Check the Feast Day:** Is it a Great Feast of the Lord or the Mother of God, etc.? What are the names of the others saints commemorated this day?
3. **Mark the Troparion and Kontakion hymns** to be used for this day. (Consider: Is it a feast of the Lord, the Mother

of God, or a particular saint or multiple saints?)

4. **Confirm with the priest** what is to be read (Hours, Epistle, special services, etc.). Mark these as well.
5. If an Epistle and Gospel will be read (such as at the Liturgy), make sure the **Prokeimenon and Alleluia verses** are marked.

It is a good idea to use a standard method of marking the books. This should include:

- Using the same bookmark / bookmark colour for a particular section each week.
- Using small, non-permanent adhesive notes to indicate where on the page a reading begins and/or ends.

Beginning the Services

When the Reader is ready to begin, and can see that the priest is vested in his epitachelion (stole), the Reader should prompt him with the words, “Father, bless,” (or in the case of a bishop serving, “Master, bless”), whereupon he will intone the blessing to begin.

If for any reason the Reader is late, and arrives after the service begins, after entering the Church and venerating the icons and making prostrations beside the Holy Table, the Reader should bow to the priest (or bishop), and immediately move to the reader stand. The Reader should wait until the person who is currently reading offers an invitation to read; even a tonsured Reader should never presume to take over the reading when he arrives late for the service.

Order in Reading

While there is sometimes a tendency to try to include as many people as possible in the work of Church reading, this causes a great deal of confusion, and draws undue attention to the variation between the voices doing the reading. As a rule, no more than two readers should share the task of reading at a given service. If more readers are present in a parish, a multi-week schedule should be created in order to share the reading between services, rather than within a single service.

The only exceptions to this rule occur on Holy Saturday during the multiple Old Testament readings, and during the reading of the Acts of the Apostles at the Vigil of Pascha; in both these cases, a variety of readers is desirable, due to the numerous chapters involved (the same would apply in the case of reading the Psalter over the reposed, and the reading of a Stasis within a Kathisma of the Psalter)

If possible, endeavour to decide in advance who will do what reading. The Senior Reader (i.e. the Reader who was tonsured first) should be responsible for this, with the blessing of the priest.

If this is not possible (such as circumstances where the second Reader arrives after the service begins), simple signals can be used to indicate what is to be read, as follows:

1. To indicate what should be read next, the Senior Reader points in the margin to the beginning point of the next reading, and slides his finger down the page to the point where the other reader should stop.
2. To indicate a stopping point while another Reader is currently reading, the Senior Reader points to the centre of the page, just below the last line which the current reader

must complete, and leaves his fingers in place, thereby blocking the rest of the text.

Shared Reading and Kathismata

The Psalter is divided into sections called *kathismata*. Each kathisma contains three *stases*, made up of two or three psalms each. One *stasis* is divided from another by a *Glory, Both now*. If reading is shared, each Reader should take an entire *stasis*; a *stasis* should not be shared between two or more Readers). Similarly, in reading the Six Psalms at Matins, or the sets of Psalms during the reading of the Hours, a single reader should complete the entire set, as a rule. Ideally, if there are two readers doing the Third and Sixth Hours, one reader would read the entire Third Hour, while the other reader would read the entire Sixth Hour.

The ‘Lord, have mercy’

The phrase “Lord, have mercy” is perhaps the most oft repeated phrase within the prayers of the Church. It is the foundation of the sacred Jesus Prayer, and in its use within the liturgical life of the Church, provides an immediate calling upon the Lord Himself, to pour out His loving-kindness and help on those who speak these words.

In almost every instance, the “Lord, have mercy” is grouped in sets of four in the liturgical readings (the only exception occurs in cases where “Lord, have mercy” is repeated thrice). Thus, the building blocks of the clear and smooth pronunciation of this prayer require the practice of its repetition in sets of four, thus:

Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy

From this basic format, the Reader can easily repeat three sets (for repetitions of twelve) or ten sets (for repetitions of forty), with a very

brief pause (*) at the end of each set of four. Thus, for twelve, we repeat:

Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy*
Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy*
Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy*

In the case of forty repetitions, which require keeping track in order to avoid losing count, it is helpful to group the repetitions into groups of eight, and discretely keep a count of five sets of eight, using the five fingers of the right hand. Thus, a single set of eight would run as follows, with no break between the fourth and fifth repetition:

Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy
Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy / Lord have mercy

One should take great care not to slur together the reading of the Lord, have mercy. This is the single most repeated prayer of the Church, the foundation of the Jesus Prayer. Each word should be pronounced clearly, however quickly it may be read. If the faithful can only hear the repetition of “mercy, mercy, mercy”, the reading is not sufficiently clear.

Abbreviations

The text of liturgical books will often use abbreviations, which should be readily understood by the Reader. These include:

O Heavenly King.

This indicates the entirety of the prayer, “*O Heavenly King, the Comforter,*” and so on to, “*...and save our souls O Good One.*”

Holy God. This indicates the triple recitation of the

prayer, “*Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.*”

Glory. This indicates, “*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,*”.

Both Now. This indicates, “*Both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.*”

Most Holy. This indicates the entirety of the prayer, “*Most Holy Trinity, have mercy on us,*” and so on to, “*... heal our infirmities for Thy Name’s sake.*”

Our Father. This indicates the entirety of the Lord’s Prayer, up to the end of, “*...but deliver us from the evil one.*” The Reader of the *Our Father* should not use the phrase “*...but deliver us from evil.*”, which is a mistranslation from outside the Church; the term “*the evil one*” is proper Orthodox terminology.

Thus, the entirety of the beginning prayers can be summarized in abbreviated form as follows:

Holy God. Glory. Both Now. Most Holy. Our Father.

Old Testament Readings

During Great Vespers and at some other services, readings from the Old Testament are included. These are customarily read in a single tone. The last phrase is read with extra slowness and emphasis, in order to signal the priest that the reading is coming to an end.

Epistle Readings

The reading from the Epistle proceeds the reading of the Gospel in the Divine Liturgy. Usually, during the singing of the Trisagion Hymn, the Reader will enter the Altar through the south deacons door, approach the priest at the High Place (the bishop's throne behind the Holy Table), present the Epistle book (cross up, if there is a cross on the binding), and say softly, "Father, bless," (on in the case of a bishop, "Master, bless."). The priest (or bishop) will bless the Epistle book with the sign of the Cross, whereupon the Reader should kiss the hand of the priest, and process out the north deacons door, to the very centre of the Church.

Prior to the reading, the Reader intones the Prokeimenon for the epistle, after the priest intones, "Wisdom!". Normally, the Reader will chant the Prokeimenon in a single tone, and the Choir will respond by singing it back. The Reader will then intone each verse, after which the choir will again sing the first verse. The Prokeimenon concludes with the Reader intoning the first half of the first verse, and the choir singing the second half, thus:

Reader: Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, as we have set our hope on Thee.

Choir: *Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, as we have set our hope on Thee.*

Reader: Rejoice in the Lord, O ye Righteous! Praise befits the just!

Choir: *Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, as we have set our hope on Thee.*

Reader: Let Thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us...

Choir: *...as we have set our hope on Thee.*

The Reader should take care to allow the priest to intone "Wisdom" and "Let us attend" at the appropriate points before the Epistle reading. After the priest says, "Wisdom!", the Reader intones, "The Reading is from the Epistle of the Holy Apostle *N.* (to the *N.*)", and reads the epistle.

In Churches of the Slavic tradition, the Epistle is chanted in elevating monotone: the first phrase is read at a single, low tone, with emphasis on the final word, the second phrase and subsequent phrases are read at ascending, higher tones, up to the final phrase, which is read extra slowly and with emphasis, to draw attention to its completion. **The Reader should bear in mind that the priest must complete a censing during the reading of the Epistle, and should not rush the reading.** If the priest has not completed the censing, the Reader should in the future be sure to adjust the speed of his reading to allow the priest to complete the censing.

Epistle readings begin with the words, "Brethren..." if they are a letter from an Apostle of the Lord, or the words, "At that time..." in the case of a reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Sometimes more than one Epistle reading will be used at a given service. In such cases, both Prokeimena are used at the same time (before the first reading). When the first reading is completed, the priest will say, "Wisdom!", and the Reader intones, "The Second Reading is from the Epistle of the Holy Apostle *N.* (to the *N.*)", and reads the second epistle.

Gospel Reading and Alleluia

Following the Epistle reading, the priest blesses the Reader with the words, "Peace be unto you who reads," and the Reader responds, "And unto thy spirit", whereupon he immediately chants the tone for the week, followed by three Alleluias, the response of the choir, and the Alleluia verses, thus:

Reader: The Alleluia is in the (First) Tone: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Choir: *Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Reader: God gives vengeance unto me, and subdues people under me!

Choir: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Reader: He magnifies the salvation of the king, and deals mercifully with Christ, with David and his seed for ever.

Choir: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

After intoning the final verse, the Reader leaves his place in the centre of the Church, returning to either the Reader stand, or to the Altar, as required, standing for the reading of the Gospel.

General Rules for Reading

With all reading in Church, certain rules apply:

1. Never read while walking or moving around.
2. **It is not necessary to make the Sign of the Cross or to bow while reading. In most practices, the reader will refrain from doing any of these things, in order to simply concentrate on reading.**
3. If prostrations are required during reading, the Reader should make the first prostration fully, with the faithful, then limit himself to a bow from the waist for the rest of the prostrations in a particular section.
4. If the priest censens you while you are reading (such as during the Epistle reading), bow slightly, but do not interrupt the reading, or make the Sign of the Cross.
5. If the Reader has a cough, a yawn, a hiccup, etc., it is better to pause for a moment, and to resume reading in a clear voice, rather than to try to read while yawning, etc. Under such circumstances, Readers normally make the Sign of the

Cross, silently asking God's help to complete the reading with reverence.

6. A Reader should not chew gum, and should certainly refrain from chewing it in Church. If a Reader is suffering from a sever cough, some water might be permitted in Church, or possibly a lozenge, if the lozenge can be discretely kept in the mouth without affecting reading. Ideally, a Reader should arrange to take cough syrup prior to the service, or arrange for someone else to read.
7. It is appropriate to mark liturgical books with cloth liturgical bookmarks or ribbons; it is also permissible to mark readings using an adhesive note, discretely displayed with the scriptural reference for the reading written on it. Scraps of paper, paper clips, and other markers should be avoided, since they are easily lost, and can ruin the pages of the liturgical book.
8. Most importantly, reading in Church must be, a prayerful labour, a work for the sake of Jesus Christ and the upbuilding of His Church, never for the honour of the Reader himself, for attention, or for personal theatrical display.

Approached properly, with faith and love, the work of a Reader is a precious service to the Church, and a blessing to those who serve in its orders.

After the Service

There exists a great temptation to simply venerate the icons at the end of the service, and rush out of the church, to attend to various worldly concerns. This is especially the case following the Divine

Liturgy, when we have fasted prior to receiving Holy Communion, and when one is eager to eat.

As a member of the clergy, the responsibilities of the Reader do not end with the dismissal. Before leaving the church, the Reader should attend to the following:

1. **The Reader Stand (Kliros)** should be cleared of books used for the service, and the appropriate books for the next service should be put in place.
2. **The Liturgical Book Shelf** should be organized, with all books left easily accessible, and neatly arranged. This is especially necessary in cases where the Reader will not be in attendance at every service, since the liturgical books will be needed for use by other faithful in the Church.
3. **Service Books used by the faithful** should be returned to their storage place, and the appropriate books for use by the faithful should be set out for the next scheduled service (e.g. after Vespers, the Vespersal books should be put away, and the books for the Divine Liturgy the next day should be set out).
4. In departing from the temple, the Reader should reverence the Holy Table and the holy icons, prayerfully giving thanks to the Lord for the completion of the divine service.

In every act, inside or outside the temple, the Reader does well who is first concerned with a humble, loving, and conscientious approach to holy things, the divine services, and to the conduct of his interior life in a reverent and Christian manner. Approached in this manner, the service of a Reader in the Church will be blessed by God, and will in turn be a blessing to the faithful, and a mighty aid in the salvation of the soul of the Reader himself.

May Our Lord Jesus Christ bless all those who serve in His Church, and strengthen them with love and reverence for this service.

THE END

And Glory be to God for all things!