

A **Moleben** (Slav. *molíben*) is a liturgical service of supplication or thanksgiving. Unlike the Divine Liturgy and the offices of the daily cycle, it can be celebrated at any time and in a variety of locations. This service is particular to the Slavic churches of the Byzantine Rite; while Byzantine Rite Christians in Greece and the Middle East celebrate the **Paraklesis** as their primary service of supplicatory prayer, the Slavs created a variety of such services as described below.

The origin and history of the moleben

It is altogether natural for Christians to express their petitions to God, and to thank Him for his blessings. It is common as well to ask the saints for their prayers to God on our behalf. While these desires are expressed in the Church's regular cycle of liturgy, there are at least two reasons why additional services might be desired:

- By tradition, the Divine Liturgy is only celebrated once per day in a given place, and not at all on some days. Similarly, the other services of the daily cycle (such as Vespers and Matins) are celebrated at fixed times, and all of these services are held in church. So if there is a desire for several services of supplication or thanksgiving, services on a day when the Divine Liturgy is not celebrated, or services in the home or outdoors, some other service must be celebrated.
- The petitions of the Church's official liturgy, while universal, are also somewhat general. It is natural for someone in great need, or in a particular instance of great thanksgiving, to desire the celebration of a service in which these particular needs or blessings can be mentioned.

Among Slavic Christians of the Byzantine Rite, a number of such services came into being. All of them are derived from the service of prayer and petition to the Mother of God known as the Paraklesis. The Paraklesis is in turn based on the morning service of Matins, so all Molebens resemble Matins to a greater or lesser degree.

Molebens in the liturgical books

Three different liturgical books of the Byzantine (Ruthenian) Catholic Church contain Molebens:

- The Horologion or *Časoslóv*, which contains the services of the daily cycle, also includes a special section of Canons and Akathists to be used as needed. The Paraklesis can be found in this section, and several of the canons have notes which explain how they are to be used when sung as part of a moleben.

- The Euchologion or *Trébnýk*, which contains the services for occasional services such as baptisms and funerals, contains a "Common moleben" to be served in any necessity.
- The Book of Prayer Services or *Molébnik* contains fourteen services for various needs - for example, a Moleben of Thanksgiving, and a Moleben in Time of Drought.

Most of these services have not been published in English - at least in part because, when the Byzantine Catholic Church was gradually moving from Church Slavonic to English for its services, it had become the custom to ask a priest to celebrate the Divine Liturgy for a particular intent, rather than to have a moleben sung.

After the Paraklesis, the Common Moleben is probably the most important. Like the Paraklesis, and some (not all) of the services in the *Molébnik*, it includes a canon (a lengthy liturgical hymn) and a Gospel reading. The Common Moleben as given in the liturgical books provides prayers to be used when the moleben is sung in honor of the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary; in honor of our Lord; in honor of a saint (Saint Nicholas), and "for a particular need". The service can be further adapted by using the corresponding hymns and prayers in honor of another saint, or some particular cause for which help is requested.

The English-language *Divine Liturgies* book of the Byzantine Catholic Church contains a drastically abbreviated "General Moleben for the Living", derived from the common moleben. This service is often celebrated after the day's Divine Liturgy for some particular need, or in thanksgiving.

Devotional Molebens

At some point, probably during the mid- to late-19th century, a new style of Moleben came into being among Greek Catholics. These new Molebens incorporated other elements from Matins (such as the festal exaltation), and entirely new hymns, which were suited for congregational or responsorial singing, whether in village churches or on pilgrimages. The most popular of these "devotional molebens" included

- the **Moleben to the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, composed by Father Isidore Dolnytsky of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the later 19th century. In this service, festal magnification of Matins (for the feast of the Sacred Heart) is sung before the Gospel, and a series of praises to the Sacred Heart is chanted by the priest afterwards, with the people singing a fixed refrain ("O most sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.")

- The **Moleben to the Mother of God**, composed by Father Meletius Lonchyna in the early 20th century. In this service, the Gospel reading is followed by a series of petitions to the Ever-Virgin Mary, each of which begins with the words, "Rejoice, O Mary", and to which the people respond with the refrain "O most holy Mother of God, save us." A series of stichera (hymns) to the Mother of God are also sung.
- The **Moleben to the Holy Cross**, which became a very popular Lenten devotion (often replacing the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts). Like the Moleben to the Sacred Heart, this service incorporated the festal magnification from Matins before the Gospel reading, the chanting of the Beatitudes after the Gospel, and the recitation by priest and people of a prayer of repentance attributed to Saint Basil the Great.

As noted above, these Moleben were often followed by the service of *Supplicatsia* (Supplications) and Benediction with the Eucharist, borrowed by the Latin Rite. When new molebens to saints were needed, they were often composed in this style. Thus, over time, the term "moleben" came to refer to many different types of services.

These three devotional molebens remained popular among immigrants to the United States. The Moleben to the Sacred Heart was rewritten to de-emphasize the (Latin-influenced) devotion to the Sacred Heart, and the resulting service is usually called the **Moleben to Jesus, Lover of Mankind**. This moleben, and the devotional Moleben to the Mother of God, continued in use at parishes and pilgrimages throughout the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century as well.

Texts and sources

The official **Church Slavonic** texts for the Midnight Office Vespers can be found in the Ruthenian *Služěbnik* (for the priest and deacon; their parts in this service are fairly brief) and the Ruthenian *Časoslóv* (for the cantor, choir and people). In the *Časoslóv*, there are separate sections for the daily Midnight Office (*Polúnoščnitsa vosednyėvnaya*), Saturday Midnight Office (*Polúnoščnitsa subbótnaya*), and Sunday Midnight Office (*Polúnoščnitsa voskrėsnaya*). These texts are fairly complete, requiring supplementation from the Octoechos (on Sundays) for the Canon to the Holy Trinity, and the Hypakoe.

There is no official **English** text for the Midnight Office.

The Midnight Office in the Parish and Home

The Midnight Office is commonly celebrated in monasteries as a nocturnal vigil, but is hardly if ever held in parish settings. However, a parish holding an all-night prayer vigil (on Good Friday, perhaps, **not** the liturgical All-night Vigil) might wish to provide materials for the Midnight Office. On the other hand, the Midnight Office makes an excellent nighttime prayer service for those of the faithful who wish to "watch and pray" during the night.

Recommended reading

- Taft, Father Robert. *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993). Contains a discussion of the history of night-time prayer and vigils in Christian worship.
- Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware. *The Festal Menaion*. (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1990). Contains an outline of the Midnight Office.

The above article is abbreviated from the original, which may be found at the following link:

<http://www.metropolitancantorinstitute.org/liturgy/Moleben.html>

~ The Emmanuel Moleben ~

The time of the Christmas Fast (also known as Philip's Fast because for most Eastern Christians, it begins the day after the feast of St. Philip, which is always 14 November and lasts until December 24) calls Byzantine Catholics to **fasting, prayer, and the giving of alms** (works of charity).

The *Emmanuel Moleben* is a candlelight service of supplication that can be served once during the Fast or once a week. In the booklet prepared by our MCI, the chant is a combination of traditional Carpatho-Rusyn melodies and some new compositions from Slovakia and the United States. The intention is to help all who pray the Moleben to enter more deeply into the Scriptures – both those that prophesy the coming of the Messiah and those that give the Gospel details leading up to His birth.

