

## **Meditation: Over and Over Again**

Why do we repeat things so often in the Orthodox Church?

This is a question visitors often ask. Worship in most evangelical communities is “free-form,” nowadays. “Worship committees” decide how a community will conduct its praise-services. Anything from a few hymns followed by a sermon, or some kind of performance, a solo, or skit, is the norm in these communities. And it is free-form because it is “spirit-led,” i.e., not conformed to any older “man-made” tradition.

Worship in the Orthodox Church, however, follows an ancient order. In a way, it belongs to a dimension of Holy Tradition that we call fixed, or “regularized” – i.e. canonical. Just as the New Testament came to be a fixed tradition of the life and teachings of Jesus preserved in the Church, and just as the moral teachings of the Ten Commandments became a fixed part of the old covenant tradition, so too the manner of our worship. The Apostles have bequeathed to us in the Church the way they worshipped. Accordingly, our liturgy is not up for grabs. We don’t change it; it changes us.

But why so much repetition? Why the litanies? Why “Lord have mercy” so many times? The answer lies in fallen human nature. The Church is a hospital. The services are medicinal. Because of our blatant inability to hold fast to that which matters most, to the “one thing needful,” we are going to hear things over and over in our worship– especially about how much God loves us and about what this love implies in our lives. Attending the services faithfully enlivens the soul and focuses the mind *in a way nothing else can*. The Lord’s prayer is a perfect example. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray; and Jesus gave them a fixed prayer to be *repeated* on a daily basis. “*When you pray, SAY.*”

Our practice of worship may appear at first to be rather dull and dreary to some. But those who experience Orthodox worship from the inside know this is hardly the case. And since when has the Holy Spirit ever been averse to good order?

Many other things in this world are totally repetitive and yet work well. Sports, for example, is the most repetitive phenomenon in human society. Baseball would not be baseball if it changed the rules from one game to the next. Yet each game is new, and possibility even exciting to some. Every game is the same and every game is, at the same time, new.

The same is true of Orthodox Worship. Led by the Holy Spirit, its prayers, hymns and sacraments elevate us to a new plane of being. This plane being, hidden from the world, we call the Resurrection.