

The Oil Lamp

The location known as the “Corner of the Icons” is a main part of the Christian home. Furthermore, its presence makes the presence of God and His saints be felt throughout the whole house.

Lighting an oil lamp in front of the icons, whether at churches or at homes, is a traditional Orthodox Christian practice. Our grandmothers held strongly to this practice, making sure that their oil lamps were lit on Saturday evenings, feast days, and on other happy occasions[1].

The practice of praying by standing in front of the “Corner of the Icons” benefits the Christian believer in many ways. It gives him/her the opportunity to worship God, to venerate His saints and His righteous people, and to offer fervent supplication during difficult and trying times. It allows the body of the faithful to express their love to God and His saints through the practice of offering pure olive oil, lighting the oil lamp with it, and placing it in front of icons. Furthermore, it becomes an opportunity to always remind the Christian believer that he/she is “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Besides this, when the oil lamp is lit, through its small burning flame it creates a pious prayerful atmosphere, especially during the evening times of prayer.

All of the abovementioned helps the Christian believer especially during his/her childhood, as it instills in the minds of children an inerasable awareness about the concept of the tangible presence of God at home. This is an understanding that cannot be taken away from them, and it accompanies them as they move to their homes, when they grow older and get married.

It used to be a common practice among the faithful to designate a location at the house, such as around the main entrance or the dining room, which are considered to be among the most used by all of the family members, as the “Corner of the Icons”. The Orthodox Russian faithful are accustomed to designate a spot in the guest room for the “Corner of the Icons” where the guest of honor is situated underneath it.

Another nice variation on this tradition is practiced by the mothers, who light the oil lamp during special times of need, such as when one family member is preparing to travel, is sick, or even when one of the children is getting ready to take an exam. The lighting of the oil lamp indicates the continuous prayer on behalf of that person.

Here, it is important to emphasize that the quality of the oil used to light the oil lamp must be top quality, because the oil here is considered to be an offering of love given by the Christian believer to God; thus, using oil of cheaper or lesser quality is unacceptable. As a point of reference, monks who care for olive trees by planting them and produce oil by pressing the olives make sure that the best quality olive oil is the one set aside not for consumption, but rather to be used in their oil lamps. As previously mentioned, the reason is that this is a gift to God: “Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee[2]”.

This tradition is still very much alive in much of the Orthodox world. Whatever Orthodox Church (house of worship) a person enters, he/she will be astonished at seeing the lit oil lamps that are hanging in front of the icon screens and the icon stands (*proskynitaria*). The faithful consider it their sacred duty to offer the oil for the use of oil lamps at the church, as they see this practice as a source of many blessings.

How come we have lost this practice in the Church of Antioch, especially within our homes? And why has this practice that still continues in some of our churches been infested with the twisted practice of replacing the oil lamp with an electric lamp?

It might be that neglecting the oil lamp constitutes a clear indication of the negligence of prayer in our life? If that is the case, doesn't that mean in practicality that God is being expelled from our lives through the disappearance of the tangible signs of the presence of God from our homes? Isn't that true especially when icons are being used by many believers as merely decorative objects? This wrong practice continues to exist, despite the repeated admonitions through this publication[3] that the icon is an object to be used for worship and not for decoration.

The pressing issue that makes it necessary today to bring the issue of the traditional oil lamp practice at homes to the focal point of discussion is the fear in the face of an increasing wrongful attitude among Christians, who tend to treat the Christian faith from an intellectual approach rather than as a living and purifying relationship with God. This type of wrongful approach will turn the Christian believer into nothing more than an advocate who believes in a certain school of thought, who tries to comprehend it and defend it only from an intellectual point of view. This, in turn, will result in reducing Christian worship to nothing more than some lifeless rituals that gather the body of the faithful only on Sundays and during a few other important occasions.

As a point of reference in this regard, to further make this issue better understood, we ask, don't most of the faithful come to attend church services late? Don't many of them approach the chalice of Holy Communion regardless of whether they are properly prepared or not? Don't many of the dormant Christians demand to abbreviate the prayer services? Don't our churches fill up during occasions such as Palm Sunday and Holy Friday while they are poorly attended during the rest of the year? Don't our churches fill up with people who would attend only during special occasions such as forty days or one year memorial services and/or weddings?

Then the question presents itself, why do we recognize the importance of the tangible elements throughout our daily life, while neglecting its vitality and significance in our relationship with God? Don't we offer gifts to those whom we love during special occasions? Don't we wear certain designated clothing or uniforms to work and different outfits for special occasions or visits? Is it not true that we buy a new outfit to match a certain special occasion when invited? If this is the case in our day-to-day life, then why do we have to be dry in our relationship with God by excluding the material element from that relationship, and as such, leaving it solely up to the intellect to remind us of God or connect us to Him?

Doesn't the abovementioned signify a secular type of atheism which is practiced by many who do not know what they are doing[4]? It is hoped that the restoration of the tradition of the oil lamps at homes and in the churches will become a motivation to remind us that God must be present with us and inside us at all times!