

What is *prosphora*?



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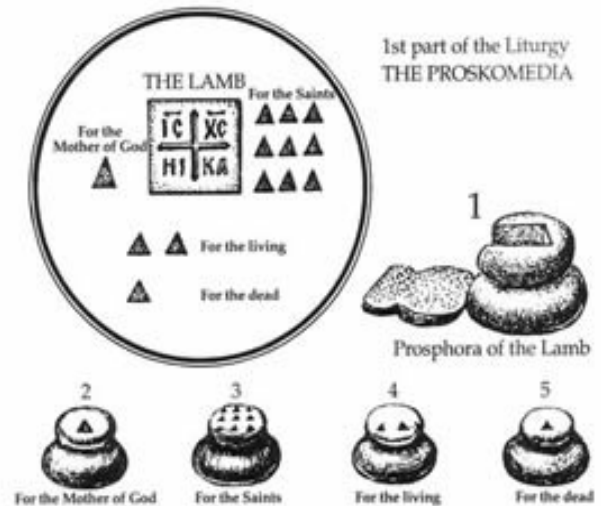
Prosphora is the name given to the loaves of bread offered during Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church. Each individual loaf is referred to as a *prophoron* or – in everyday Russian – a *prosforka*. The name comes from a Greek word that simply means “an offering”.

In the Russian Orthodox tradition the loaves are customarily small – around 60mm in diameter – and made in two parts. These represent the two natures of Jesus Christ, divine and human. Before baking, the top of each loaf is stamped with a seal that includes a cross and the letters IC-XC NI-KA, meaning “Jesus Christ conquers”.

In other Orthodox traditions the loaves are generally larger with a more elaborate seal.

How are prosphora used?

Before Divine Liturgy begins the priest carefully selects and prepares five prosphora. He then begins a special service of preparation called the *prothesis* (“setting forth”) or *proskomedia* (“offering”). This service is done quietly by the priest inside the altar. One of the prosphora prepared is called the “Lamb” and is offered on the Holy Table during Divine Liturgy. When consecrated, it becomes the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ and, when mixed with the consecrated wine that becomes His Blood, a part of Holy Communion. The other four prosphora are used to commemorate the Mother of God, the ranks of saints, and the living and departed.



In addition, the people can offer prosphora for themselves and on behalf of their living and departed Orthodox Christian family members and friends. In the Russian tradition the prosphora are purchased at the candle-desk near the entrance to the church. The names of those to be commemorated are written on slips of paper – red for the living and black for the departed – or in a special commemoration book (a “помяник”, in Russian). These names are read out in the altar during the service of preparation and the Divine Liturgy.

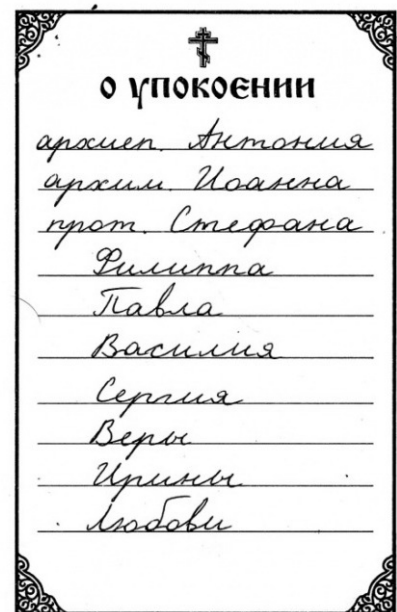
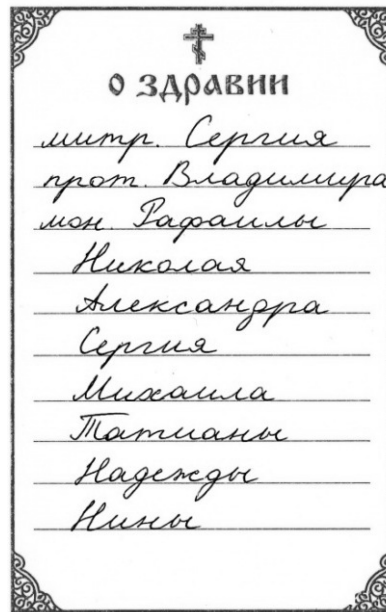
How should the names of those to be commemorated be written?

The **full baptismal names** of those to be commemorated should be written – for example: Michael rather than Misha, and Elizabeth rather than Liza. Clergy and monastics should be given their full rank – for example: *Reader* Stephen rather than Stephen, *Protodeacon* Vladimir rather than *Father*

Vladimir, and *Abbess* Anna rather than *Matushka* Anna. Surnames should not be included. All names should be written neatly and clearly.

If writing names in Russian it is important to use the genitive case (“родительный падеж”).

At Divine Liturgy only baptised Orthodox Christians may be commemorated.



Books and lists should be checked carefully and regularly to make sure that the details are correct and up to date.

When should prosphora and the lists of names be submitted?

To avoid delays in the Divine Liturgy, prosphora and lists of names need to be taken into the altar as early as possible. They cannot be received any later than during the Cherubic Hymn (Херувимская песнь, “Иже херувимы”). When a lot of prosphora are brought into the altar late, the choir has to repeat the Cherubic Hymn to give the priest extra time to commemorate those whose names are submitted. In many parishes an order for prosphora and arrangements for the commemoration of names can be made on the preceding evening. It is also possible to make arrangements to have a certain number of prosphora and names submitted at every Divine Liturgy.

How are names commemorated by the priest?

This depends on the number of names to be commemorated. When the number of names is great the priest will simply take three small particles from each prosphoron, praying as he does so for those who made the offering and for the living and departed for whom it was made. The lists of

names will be read by the deacon and the senior altar servers. If the number of names is less, the priest may take a small particle for each name. The prosphora are then wrapped and returned to the candle-desk for distribution to those who offered them.

What happens to these particles of bread?

At the end of the Divine Liturgy these particles are placed by the priest or deacon into the chalice holding the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. As this is done, the priest or deacon prays: “Wash away by Thy precious Blood, O Lord, the sins of those commemorated here, through the prayers of Thy Saints”.

Are any other pieces taken from the prosphora?

In addition to the small particles, the priest takes one large wedge-shaped piece from each prosphoron. These pieces of blessed bread are called *antidoron* (meaning “instead of the gifts”) and are given to the faithful after Holy Communion. In ancient times the antidoron were given to those who did not receive Holy Communion, but now they are given to all present.

How should prosphora be eaten?

Prosphora is blessed bread and should be handled and eaten with due reverence. Those eating it should take care not to drop crumbs on the floor, and the paper in which it was wrapped should be burned rather than thrown in the rubbish. Any crumbs that fall should be collected and either eaten or burned with the paper. Children eating prosphora should be carefully supervised. From ancient times it has been the custom to eat prosphora on an empty stomach, often with Holy Water or, if appropriate, a little sweet red wine.

Who may take the wrapped prosphora at the end of the service?

The wrapped prosphora may be taken by those who offered them. When this has been done, any prosphora left over may be taken by those who wish to have them.