

ANTIMINS OR ANTIMENSION

(Greek word meaning “in place of the table”)

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

In the Orthodox Christian liturgical tradition, the antimins is among the most important liturgical necessities used in the altar during the Divine Liturgy. It is a type of icon, a rectangular cloth, traditionally sewn of either linen or silk. Beautifully embellished, it always reflects the image of Christ’s entombment and the four Evangelists.

The antimins is inscribed with the text from the Holy Saturday Troparion: *“The noble Joseph, taking down Thy most pure body from the Tree, wrapped it in fine linen and sweet spices and laid it in a new tomb.”*



The antimins, once properly folded, sits in the center of another slightly larger cloth called the eileton, by which it is completely encased and protected. The two (which are folded in nearly the same manner) are then placed in the center of the altar table, underneath the Gospel Book, and unfolded only during the Divine Liturgy, in the moments before the Great Entrance.

The antimins became the sign of unity at the level of the archdioceses of the same patriarchal see, as well as at the level of the parishes of the same archdiocese. Therefore, when a new patriarch is elected, a new antimins is printed in his name and sent to all the archdioceses of the whole See to be consecrated by every metropolitan in his archdiocese, who puts his own signature on it. And whenever a new metropolitan is elected, he asks the patriarch for the number of antimins his archdiocese needs, and then he consecrates them in a service known as the "Antimins Consecration Service" and adds his signature to each one. He then collects the old antimins and distributes the new ones.



The metropolitan's signature on the antimins signifies the authorization given by the metropolitan to the priests in his archdiocese to perform the Liturgy. Also it is a symbol of the unity that exists between the bishop, the clergy, and the faithful.

In the early Christian centuries, the bishop served the Divine Liturgy, assisted by priests, known as "elders" (*presbyteroi*, in Greek). It was customary for the Divine Liturgy to be held in one place in the city, but as the cities grew and the number of Christians increased, churches were built in every parish of the faithful, and thus,

the bishop authorized the priests to hold the Divine Liturgy in their parishes. The Orthodox liturgical tradition still preserves this tradition until today.

The Typikon requires the priest who celebrates the Divine Liturgy in the absence of the bishop, to bow in front of the episcopal throne before the Divine Liturgy, as a sign of obtaining the authorization to celebrate the Divine Liturgy from the bishop.



A small piece of a martyr's relic is ceremoniously and prayerfully placed in a small pocket at the top of the antimins as each one is consecrated. It is an essential component, without which the Holy Eucharist cannot be celebrated. The relic should exclusively come from a martyr because the Church was founded on the blood of martyrs and the Divine Liturgy used to be celebrated on the tombs of martyrs, in the early Christian centuries.

The Divine Sacrament which is held on the antimins is a real, bloodless, and living sacrifice, drawing on the bloody sacrifice of the Cross.

In very exceptional situations, where there were no consecrated liturgical items to hold the Divine Liturgy, priests performed the Divine Liturgy with simple

instruments on the chest of a baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christian believer, as was done during World War II.

The placement of the relics in the antimins originates from the service of consecrating the Holy Table in the Holy Altar. Therefore, the antimins is considered a mobile altar, and if necessary, the Divine Liturgy can be held on it even if the altar table has not yet been consecrated. In addition, the Divine Liturgy can be held on the antimins anywhere outside the church.



The antimins also serves in the preservation of particles (crumbs) that may fall from the dividing and cutting of the Holy Lamb; particles fall on it, and the priest collects and places them in the Holy Chalice after Communion.

Finally, great care should be taken not to stain or damage the antimins in any way, including never washing or dry cleaning it. The antimins has already been cleaned and protected against spills and stains of any kind. Should the antimins become worn, torn, or damaged, please contact the metropolitan's office for instructions on the return and replacement protocol.

(Photos of Metropolitan Saba consecrating the antimins for St. Mary Church of Hunt Valley, Maryland on May 24, 2023. Each antimins contains the relics of (1) the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, (2) the Twenty-thousand martyrs of Nicomedia, and (3) St. Sergius of Rakvere.)