

Service of Entering the Newborn into the Church after Forty Days

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Many questions surround the tradition of introducing a newborn child to the church after forty days.

The first question: Why forty days, and can it be done before that?

The number 40 carries spiritual significance in the Bible, dating back to the Old Testament. It symbolizes encounters with God. For instance:

- The Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before reaching the Promised Land.
- Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the Ten Commandments.
- Elijah, the prophet, fasted for 40 days.
- Most importantly, Jesus Christ Himself fasted for 40 days before starting His ministry.

This tradition echoes Leviticus 12, which says a newborn male child would be brought to the temple after 40 days, and a female child after 80 days. A sacrifice would be offered on their behalf. Following this practice, Joseph the Betrothed and the Theotokos presented the infant Jesus at the temple after 40 days (Luke 2:22-28). In the New Testament, the Church treated both male and female infants the same. By doing so, the Church followed the example set by Jesus.

This tradition continues today with a special service welcoming newborns into the church for the first time.

In ancient times, there was a crucial need for postpartum recovery and health. Mothers and newborns lacked the advanced medical care available today. Women typically remained confined to their homes, often bedridden, for several days after childbirth. During this period, they focused on nourishing themselves with wholesome food. Bleeding after childbirth was common, but it did not usually subside within a short time. Unlike today, there were no sanitary napkins, paper towels, or cotton swabs. This is why words like impurity, purity, and cleanliness are prevalent in the Book of Leviticus and the Old Testament. In the Gospel of Luke (2:22), we learn about the infant Jesus being presented at the temple on the day of purification.

In the past, newborns were often tightly wrapped in cloths for the first forty days. This practice aimed to keep the baby's limbs straight and prevent potential injuries like hip dislocation.

The forty-day timeframe was significant for both the mother's postpartum recovery and the baby's well-being. This period likely influenced the tradition of introducing the child to the church after forty days, further solidifying the timeframe's importance.

In today's world, thanks to advancements in medicine and healthcare, women often give birth in hospitals and are discharged within a day or two. They can quickly resume their normal activities. However, this modern reality prompts questions: Should a woman refrain from attending church until forty days have passed since her delivery? Should the newborn child not be taken to church before the forty-day mark?

The answers to these questions vary based on cultural norms and local customs. Nevertheless, the general pastoral approach emphasizes the importance of preserving the forty-day tradition. As mentioned earlier, the number 40 carries significant spiritual meaning. Disregarding this tradition might gradually diminish its significance and lead to the adoption of concepts that deviate from biblical teachings.

The next question is, can a newborn be brought inside the sanctuary? To answer this, we need to dive into the liturgical texts and explore the theological and historical reasons behind this tradition. By understanding the original meaning and the context in which it developed, we can arrive at a well-informed answer.

The Great Euchologion, a book for priests performing church services, offers specific instructions for postpartum women returning to church with their newborns:

After forty days, having completed her purification and ablutions (the washing of one's body, usually in a religious rite/meaning), the mother brings her child to the church. The future godfather/godmother (the person who will receive the child once baptized) is present as well. The mother stands with her child in the narthex, in front of the church doors. The priest, wearing his phelonion (outer garment), then approaches and says...

An addendum to this service states:

Know that if the child has not yet been baptized, the priest concludes the prayer, and the mother enters the church without the child. (In the margin of this note, the explanation is provided: Just as unbaptized adults, who are catechumens, are not allowed to enter the inner part of the church and remain in the narthex, the same rule applies for unbaptized children until their baptism.)

We can conclude from the previous text, that unbaptized individuals are not allowed to enter the sanctuary of the church. Instead, they remain in the narthex and observe the service from there.

After the Roman Empire converted to Christianity and paganism declined, the use of the narthex and consequently the category of catechumens diminished.

In many Orthodox churches located in countries that remained under Ottoman occupation for years—such as the Middle East, Greece, the Balkans, and parts of Bulgaria and Romania—extreme poverty and persecution led to the absence of a narthex. This resulted in the service for a newborn child being moved to the nave of the church. There, the priest holds the child in front of the icon of the Mother of God in the iconostasis, and recites the troparion, "Rejoice, O Mother of God, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." The answer to the preceding question is reaffirmed: neither male nor female unbaptized children enter the sanctuary for this ceremony.

However, should there be an urgent reason to baptize a child before the traditional forty-day period, the baptismal service makes no mention of the protocol for introducing the newly baptized into the sanctuary. In keeping with ancient tradition, only the priest and his assistant are permitted entry into the sanctuary during the service. We shall delve deeper into this subject in a forthcoming article.

Consequently, the priest is to conduct the service at the church's western entrance. Following this, he will proceed into the church with the child, accompanied by the mother or both parents, to the front of the iconostasis. There, in front of the icon of the Theotokos, the priest will bestow a blessing upon the child as previously described, before entrusting the child back to the care of the parents.

One remaining question is: when should this service be performed? It's actually an independent ceremony, flexible in timing. In the past, in smaller towns in Orthodox countries, access to churches was easier. Work schedules didn't prevent mothers

and children from attending on the fortieth day itself. However, in today's world, the service often takes place on Sundays. After the choir finishes chanting "Holy God" during the Great Doxology (in Orthros), the priest begins the prayers for the child and mother at the church's entrance. He then completes the blessing in front of the iconostasis, before returning the child to the parents. This practice allows the entire parish community, as one united church, to share the joy of welcoming a new member, the newborn child.

May God bless your children and keep them by His grace always.