

Canon Basics

A canon is a form of liturgical poetry (different from the canons that are the “laws” of the Church) that gained prominence in the Church in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹ Although the Canon of Preparation should be read before receiving Holy Communion, along with the other preparatory prayers, a surprising number of people are not familiar or comfortable with canons. This chapter provides a very basic introduction—enough to encourage, perhaps, the faithful to pray canons at home.

Basic Structure

Reading a canon from the small prayer books is straightforward where everything is written out. Things can become confusing, however, when refrains are missing or when combining two or more canons.

Generally speaking, a canon has (theoretically) nine odes.² However, except for Tuesdays in Great Lent and Saint Andrew’s *Great Canon*, the second ode is omitted as being too heavily penitential. So, the usual order is **1, 3, 4, 5, etc.** = 8 odes.

The first hymn of each ode is called the *heirmos* in Greek, *eirmos* or *irmos* in Russian, which means “link.” It is the “link” between the original *biblical ode* (see below) and the ode of the canon. The *heirmos* usually summarizes or reflects the meaning of the biblical ode, but in the case of feast day canons, it more often relates to the feast.

The troparia that follow the *heirmos* (typically there are four) are each preceded by a refrain, for example, “Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me,” said with the sign of the cross and a bow. Before the next-to-last troparion, the refrain is replaced by “Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit”; before the last troparion, “Both

¹ See Lives of St John of Damascus (Dec 4) and St Andrew of Crete (Jul 4).

² There are, for example, mon-ode and di-ode canons (canons with only one or two odes) and triodes (three odes, from which the Lenten *Triodion* gets its name), but this is a *basic* introduction.

now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.” The last troparion usually is addressed to or in regard to the Mother of God and is called a “Theotokion.”

After the third ode, there may be a Sessional (“Sitting”) Hymn (*Kathisma* in Greek, *Sedalion* in Russian). If so, we preface it with “Lord, have mercy” thrice, “Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, Both now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.”¹ After the Sessional Hymn, we continue with odes four, five, and six.

After the sixth ode, we say a litany: “Lord, have mercy” thrice, Glory, Both Now, and then the kontakion, ikos, and hymns (if any). Then we continue with odes seven, eight, and nine. (The *Song of Mary* before the ninth ode, interspersed with “More honorable than the Cherubim,” is typically done only at Matins.²)

At the end of the canon, we say, “It is truly meet to bless thee, O Theotokos . . .” followed by a prostration. Then, if there is a concluding prayer for the canon—normally only the canons in the personal prayer books have these—it is said here.

The Biblical Odes

The Biblical Odes³ are read with the canons in matins of Great Lent (except Sunday). If one so desires, however, they may be said anytime in private devotions. In any case, a familiarity with them is always helpful.

Ode One: *Song of Moses*, Exodus 15:1–19

[Ode Two: *Ode of Moses*, Deuteronomy 32:1–43]

Ode Three: *Prayer of Anna* (Hanna), 1 Kings 2:1–10 (in Western Bibles 1 Samuel 2:1–10)

Ode Four: *Prayer of Habbakuk*, Habbakuk 3:2–19

Ode Five: *Prayer of Isaiah*, Isaiah 26:9–20

Ode Six: *Prayer of Jonah*, Jonah 2:3–10 (in Western Bibles Jonah 2:2–9)

Ode Seven: *Prayer of the Holy Three Children*, Daniel 3:26–56 (in Western Bibles in the Apocrypha)

¹ In a service in the church, this would be a Small Litany led by the deacon.

² Also in Matins, the next-to-last refrain in the eighth ode, instead of Glory is, “We bless Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Lord,” and before the katavasia we say, “We praise, we bless, we worship the Lord: praising and supremely exalting Him unto all ages.” Note to the detail-voracious: the Magnificat is sung in the tone of the final canon. A vesperal extra: “Lord, I have cried” is sung in the same tone as the first sticheron.

³ The Biblical Odes are also available in liturgical psalters.

Ode Eight: *Song of the Holy Three Children*, Daniel 3:57–88 (in Western Bibles in the Apocrypha)

Ode Nine: *Song of Mary*, Luke 1:46–55, and *Prayer of Zacharias*, Luke 1:68–79

Praying a Canon by Itself

If one’s normal Evening Prayers include Small Compline, a canon is usually read after the Symbol of Faith and before the concluding Trisagion.⁴

To pray a canon when not in conjunction with a service,⁵ the order is as follows.

Prayers before the canon:

Through the prayers of our holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us. Amen.

Glory to Thee, our God, glory to Thee.

Heavenly King... through Our Father...

Lord, have mercy. (12 times)

Glory. Both Now.

O come, let us worship...

Psalm 50

[Symbol of Faith]

The canon(s) [and/or Akathist]

Prayers after the canon:

It is truly meet to bless thee, O Theotokos...

Concluding Prayer of the canon (if there is one)

Trisagion through Our Father...

Lord, have mercy (3 times)

Glory. Both Now.

More honorable than the cherubim...

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us. Amen.

⁴ Compline canons are provided in *The Octoechos* from St John of Kronstadt Press.

⁵ Although rarely done, a canon can be said at Vespers after the Song of Symeon and before the concluding Trisagion. It is read, not sung, straight through with the refrain before each troparion (and Glory, Both Now), and with the kontakion and oikos after the sixth ode, but without heirmoi, katavasiae, litanies, or additional hymns or prayers.

Praying More than One Canon

When canons are read together, the first ode of each canon is read: the first ode of the first canon, then the first ode of the second canon (etc., if more). Then the third ode of each canon is read: the third ode of the first canon, the third ode of the second canon (etc., if more). Glory and Both Now are said only before the next-to-last and last troparia of the *final* canon of each ode.

Details (see outline on next page). The first ode of the *first canon* is read: heirmos, refrain, troparion, refrain, troparion, etc. Before the last troparion of the first canon, which is almost always a Theotokion, the refrain is replaced with “Most Holy Mother of God, save us.”¹

Then we begin the first ode of the *second canon*. The heirmos of the second (and third) canon is omitted.² Start with the refrain of the second canon, then the first troparion and so on (if this is not the final canon, “Most Holy Mother of God, save us” before the Theotokion). If there is a third canon, read its first ode in the same way. Glory and Both Now are the refrains for the last two troparia of the final canon.

That completes the first ode of all the canons. All of the following odes are done in the same manner.

After the third ode: Lord have mercy (thrice), Glory, Both Now, then the kontakia (if any) from all but the first canon, then the sessional hymns (if any).³ Then odes 4, 5, and 6.

After the sixth ode: Lord, have mercy (thrice), Glory, Both Now, then kontakion and ikos (if any) of the first canon.

Then odes 7, 8, and 9.

After the ninth ode: “It is truly meet” (with prostration), then all Concluding Prayers of the canons are read (if any).

If an Akathist is to be read with the canon, *all* of the kontakia are read after the third ode, and the entire Akathist is done after the sixth ode.

¹ In the first canon, if the refrains are written out and the last two troparia are preceded with Glory, Both Now, ignore these, because the Glory and Both Now are said before the last two troparia, respectively, of the *final* canon.

² Except in some feast day canons; special rubrics are provided in the books.

³ Some Slav sources put the sessional hymns before the kontakia.

Structure for Each Ode of Combined Canons

First Canon

Heirmos

Refrain of first canon

1st troparion

Refrain of first canon

2nd troparion

*** *etc.* ***

“Most holy Mother of God, save us.”

Last troparion [Theotokion]¹

Intermediate Canon(s) (if any)

[Heirmos—not read]

Refrain of intermediate canon

1st troparion

Refrain of intermediate canon

2nd troparion

*** *etc.* ***

“Most holy Mother of God, save us.”

Last troparion [Theotokion]

Final Canon

[Heirmos—not read]

Refrain of final canon

1st troparion

Refrain of final canon

2nd troparion

*** *etc.* ***

“Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.”

Next-to-last troparion

“Both now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.”

Last troparion

¹ In some canons, especially feast day canons to the Master, the last troparion is not a Theotokion, in which case the refrain of the canon is said instead of “Most holy Mother of God, save us.”

Refrains for Octoechos Matins Canons

For those who wish to read the matins canons in the *Octoechos*, the refrains are shown below. (This will make sense when you have an *Octoechos* in front of you.) Same rules apply for Theotokia (preceded with “Most Holy Mother of God, save us”) and Glory, Both Now (before the last two troparia of the final canon of each ode).

Sunday: *Canon of the Resurrection:*

Glory, O Lord, to Thy holy Resurrection.

Canon of the Cross and Resurrection:

Glory, O Lord, to Thy precious Cross and Resurrection.

Canon of the Theotokos:

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Monday: *First Canon*

Have mercy on me, O Lord, have mercy on me.

O ye holy Martyrs, intercede for us.

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Second Canon

O ye holy Archangels and Angels, intercede for us.

Tuesday: *First Canon*

Have mercy on me, O Lord, have mercy on me.

O ye holy Martyrs, intercede for us.

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Second Canon

O holy Forerunner and Baptist of Christ, intercede for us.

Wednesday: *First Canon*

Glory, O Lord, to Thy precious Cross.

O ye holy Martyrs, intercede for us.

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Second Canon

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Thursday: *First Canon*

O ye holy Apostles, intercede for us.

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Second Canon

Holy Father Nicholas, intercede for us.

Friday: *First Canon*

Glory, O Lord, to Thy precious Cross.

O ye holy Martyrs, intercede for us.

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Second Canon

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Saturday: *First Canon*

All ye saints, intercede for us.

Grant rest, O Lord, to the souls of Thy departed servants.

Most holy Mother of God, save us.

Second Canon: as indicated in text or

Wondrous is God in His saints, the God of Israel.

Grant rest, O Lord, to the souls of Thy departed servants.

Triadicon

When a troparion is marked as “Triadicon” or “To the Trinity,” the refrain preceding it is “O Holy Trinity, our God, have mercy on us” or “O Holy Trinity, our God, glory to Thee”—unless it is the penultimate troparion of the final canon, in which case say, as usual, “Glory to the Father....”

Katavasiae

A katavasia is a concluding hymn for an ode. One would not normally worry about katavasiae in private devotions, but a word of explanation might be helpful.

The “katavasia” is a “going down” as the choirs of monks from each side of the church go down and meet in the center to sing the hymn together. In an ordinary matins, the katavasia is the irmos of the final canon of the ode, sung only after the third, sixth, eighth, and ninth odes. In a more highly ranked service, a katavasia is sung at the end of each ode; sometimes seasonal katavasiae are assigned. For festal services, they are of the feast or the season.

This canon primer can be printed out from www.OrthodoxReader.com.