

Bread line: Letter from St. Petersburg

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

When I visited the Cathedral of the Icon of Kazan in St. Petersburg, Russia, a crowd was lined up waiting for a closer look at the storied image of Our Lady of Kazan, one of the most revered icons in Russia. After watching the scene for a while, I decided that two kinds of people were in line. Some were tourists, there for a quick look at the icon. When it came their turn to stand in front of it, they examined it this way and that, high and low. They looked like pawnshop appraisers. Others behaved differently: they bowed or knelt for the brief time allowed them in front of the icon. They were people at worship, participants who'd come to look into the mysteries of faith to which the icon pointed.

Later the sound of chanting drew me a few steps away into a side chapel. In the middle of the chapel, golden-robed boy priests huddled around a book that one of them was holding up for the rest to see. Their hair was long, their beards scraggly and untrimmed. They looked like my seminary classmates in the 1970s.

Then women's voices answered the chanting. I looked around for them and realized that they were in the midst of the worshipping crowd. Nothing distinguished these women as a choir except their singing. They did not wear robes, but were dressed in white blouses and skirts of varying colors. They had covered their heads with kerchiefs, but so had many of the other women present. They did not hold worship books or have the benefit of a conductor. Though they were almost invisible amidst the swarm of worshipers, their singing swelled up from the crowd.

I was somewhere between being a spectator and being a worshiper. I yearned to worship God with God's people, but my ignorance of the language and customs kept me on the sidelines. From my place against the back wall I hummed along, trying to supply in my mind the English words for the liturgy.

The faithful, who were clustered around the priests, formed a living cell, pulsing with life. The priests and choir formed the nucleus while the people circled, moved closer

and then further away, causing the cell to expand and contract.

At some point five of the priests withdrew to the chancel, closing the doors behind them and pulling a curtain shut. Apparently what would soon take place at that altar was too profound for people to witness. One priest remained outside and held a cross before the people. He chanted at length and from memory about the wonders of the faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. When he was done the people lined up in front of him to kiss the cross.

Someone appeared with a large basket, and the worshipers slowly moved toward him. I thought it was an offering basket, but as I watched people reaching into the basket, I realized that they were taking something out of it. They unwrapped packets and ate what they unwrapped. Sometimes they gave a portion to the person next to them. When they were done, a few people scoured the floor for crumbs. Like pigeons in the park they plucked from the ground, eating the crumbs they found.

This was the *antidoron*, I realized, the blessed bread brought out at the end of the service from the altar behind the chancel doors. Just as God spoke the word from a place beyond human sight and as this word became incarnate in Jesus Christ for humans to see and touch and experience, so the bread came from the altar representing these holy mysteries.

It was an offering basket all right, but I had been confused about the direction of the offering. These worshipers knew that the offering comes from God to us, and that we live in response to God's offering of God's own self in Jesus Christ.

This is eucharistic living. It begins with God's gifts to us. Our offerings and lives of service are a response to the offerings that God gives to us. That is true both for our individual lives and for our corporate life as the church. Though I didn't understand the language or the particulars of the ritual, I recognized this Christian truth being enacted once again in a side chapel in St. Petersburg.