A Brief and Practical Guide For Turning A Priestly Service Into A Lay Service

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From time to time, it is necessary for laypeople to serve liturgical services that would otherwise be led by Orthodox Christian clergy. While this is not normative, priests often bless or encourage lay services to meet the specific needs of our Orthodox people. (In terms of what we "call" these services, we might prefer "Lay Service" rather than the more common "Reader's Service" because--in fact--there is often not a tonsured reader present to lead the Lay Service, in any case.)

Whether we are speaking of "common" services such as Lay Daily Vespers (replacing Daily Vespers) or Lay Great Vespers (replacing Great Vespers) or Typika-Obednitsa (replacing Divine Liturgy,) the basic rules for how to adjust the services for lay leadership are rather simple. Adjusting more complex services, such as Holy Week services, are also quite simple. The same rules apply. What are the basic rules for turning a priestly service into a lay service?

1. Create a clear "home base" that mimics an altar. In the church, that base could be main analogion or tetrapod in the center of the church. At home, it could be your icon corner on which is set a cross and Gospel (or Bible.) At home, you might also place those items, along with some icons and a candle or lamp on your dining room table. It should be clean (perhaps with nice seasonal cloth) and befitting divine service.
2. The leader of the service (perhaps a reader or head of family) *might* occupy a central place similar to the way a priest would stand in front of the altar at church.
3. A hand censer *may* be used (but is optional) by the leader or one deputized to offer incense. Incense would be offered at the same times in which incense might normally be offered in a priestly service (e.g., at "Lord I Call" in Vespers.) If censing is employed in the service, the one offering the incense should trace the sign-of-the-cross with each censing motion and would follow the same clockwise pattern that the clergy would usually make. (At Typika, a full censing could take place during Hours or just before Typika. Another censing could take place during the Alleluia, just as in Liturgy.)
4. A fixed service text is required (e.g., from the Horologion.) In addition, the moveable parts are also required (stikhera, troparia, kontakia, prokeimena, etc...) In some cases, (e.g., Holy Week) there is often one unified text that is prepared and usable.
5. In place of the priestly benedictions at the beginning and ends of each service--and also in place of the priestly exclamations--the lay order would have us say instead "Through the prayers of our holy fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy

on us. Amen..." (There are small variations here). Laypeople should not offer the priestly blessings such as "Blessed is our God..." or "Blessed is the Kingdom!"
6. All blessings (e.g. "Peace be with you all") are omitted.
7. In place of the long litanies, "Lord, have mercy" is said twelve times; in place of the little litanies, "Lord have mercy" is said three times. ("Glory...now and ever... Amen." may replace the exclamations, in some cases.)
8. The Gospel is not intoned, but read in an ordinary voice.
9. All other hymns, psalms and prayers are read or sung as when a priest serves. (Try to use settings and translations that you already know!)

Here is one example of a Lay Great Vespers (for eve of St. Mary of Egypt Sunday)

Here is another example of a Lay Typika or *Obednitsa* Service (replacing Liturgy, in this case for the Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt.)