

Church Etiquette

In the Orthodox Church there are numerous customs and traditions that are important parts of our worship. Some of these customs are universal to the Church, while some may vary from parish to parish, or cultural tradition. The following, adapted from an article by Father David Barr of the Antiochian Archdiocese, addresses questions most often asked by those new to the faith, and even those not so new...

Standing vs. Sitting

The traditional posture for prayer and worship in the Orthodox Church is to stand. In “Orthodox countries” there are usually no pews in the churches. Chairs or benches on the side walls are reserved for those who need them, i.e. the elderly, infirm, “with child”, etc. In North America, some Orthodox faithful have introduced pews into their churches thus creating the artificial “need” to figure out when to sit and when to stand. First of all, it is fully acceptable (even preferable) to stand for the entire service. Whether a church has few chairs or many, there are times when one should definitely stand:

- The beginning of the service: “Blessed is the Kingdom...”
- The Entrances: with the Gospel and later, the Chalice
- Gospel Reading
- The Creed, the Lord's Prayer
- The Anaphora beginning with “Let us stand aright” through the Hymn to the Theotokos
- The distribution of Holy Communion, i.e. the Body and Blood of Christ in our midst, through the end of the dismissal

As you can see, this leaves little time for sitting. Whatever parish you are in, when in doubt, stand in prayer—yet remaining sensitive to not drawing attention to oneself, or blocking other's participation in the service.

Lighting Candles

Lighting candles is an important part of Orthodox worship. We light them as we pray, making an offering to accompany our prayers. Orthodox typically light candles upon entering the church, after venerating the icons. If a service is already in progress, and the candlestands are up front, it is a good idea to wait until after the service to light candles so as to not distract others from prayer, nor draw undue attention to oneself.

Venerating Icons

When you enter the church, it is traditional to venerate the icons. Usually there are icons at the entrance to the church and many churches have icon stands in the front as well. When venerating (kissing) an icon, pay attention to where you kiss. It is not proper to kiss an icon in the face. You wouldn't go up and kiss the Lord or His mother on the lips, would you? You would kiss their hand, and only if they invited you would you even dare to kiss them on the cheek. Pay attention to what you are doing. When you approach an icon to venerate it, kiss the gospel, scroll, or hand cross in the hand of the person in the

icon, or kiss the hand or foot of the person depicted. As you venerate an icon, show proper respect to the person depicted in the icon - the same respect you would show the person by venerating him or her in an appropriate place. And remember, blot off your lipstick before kissing.

Entering Church (Late)

The time to arrive at church is before the service starts, however, it has become the custom - or rather the bad habit - for some to come to church late. If you arrive after the Divine Liturgy begins, try to enter the church quietly - and observe what is happening. If the Epistle or Gospel is being read or the Little or Great Entrance is taking place, wait until it is finished to quickly find a seat. If Father is giving the sermon, stay in the back until he has concluded. If in doubt, check with one of the ushers to see if it is a good time to seat yourself. Try not to interrupt the Liturgy with your entrance. The best way to avoid this problem is to arrive on time - then you don't have to wonder if it's okay to come in or not. Those who arrive late (especially after the Gospel) should generally refrain from partaking of the Eucharist that day as "proper preparation" for Holy Communion assumes the ascetical effort of arriving on time. One should refrain from venerating icons in the front of the church, etc. for the same reasons given under "Lighting Candles."

Crossing One's Legs

In many cultures throughout the world, crossing one's legs is taboo and considered very disrespectful. In North America there are no real taboos against such action, rather, we tend to cross our legs to get comfortable. Should we do so in church? No. Not because it is "wrong" for us ever to cross our legs, but because it is too casual—and too relaxed—for being in the presence of God. When we get settled in our favorite chair at home, we lean back, kick up our legs, and allow our minds to wander. Remember, sitting in church is a concession, not the norm of prayer. We should remain attentive (i.e.: "Let us attend") at all times as a soldier prepared for (spiritual) battle before his commander. Should we sit, we must do so attentively and not too comfortably that our minds not wander off the "one thing necessary."

In and Out

Certainly parents should have ready access to the doors to take small children out if they are distracting or need a short break—for this reason the doors are to be accessible. For times when it is inappropriate, unless necessary, to walk out of the service see "Standing vs. Sitting".

A Word About Lipstick

Lipstick looks terrible smeared on icons, crosses, the communion spoon, and the priest's or bishop's hand. Hand-written icons have been ruined by lipstick; and even though the cross or spoon can usually be cleaned after everyone venerates, it's not very considerate to those who follow. What is the answer? If one insists on wearing lipstick to church, blot your lips well before venerating an icon, taking Communion, or kissing the cross or the priest's or bishop's hand. Point of consideration: God, Whom we

alone come before in Liturgy, is not impressed with our external attractiveness, but with the adorning of our souls in humility, good works, and piety.

Talking During Church

Besides being disrespectful toward God Who is present, it is distracting for others who are striving to pray. This rule includes all services of the Church, whether it be the Hours read prior to Divine Liturgy, or the priest hearing Confessions after Vespers. It is best to save conversation for the fellowship hall, inviting guests downstairs for a visit.

Kiss (Don't Shake) the Bishop's and Priest's Hand

The proper way to greet a bishop or priest is to ask his blessing and kiss his right hand. How do you do this? Approach the bishop or priest with your right hand over your left and say "Father ("Master," in the case of a bishop), bless." This is appropriate and traditional, rather than shaking their hands. When you receive such a blessing it is Christ Himself who offers the blessing through the hand of the priest or bishop. Who of us would not want all of Christ's blessings we can get?

Sunday Dress

There was a time when people put on their "Sunday best" to go to church. By contrast, there is today not an insignificant backlash against such propriety. Many contemporary churches innocently flaunt a "come as you are" pitch as part of their advertising ploy. Though God does not demand us to "dress up" for Him (as though He is in any way impressed by our external appearance), the fact is, as followers of Christ in all areas of our life, we should offer Christ our "best" and not just our "leftovers" (c.f. Cain and Abel). Our dress should always, especially at church, be becoming of a Christian. We dress modestly, not in a flashy way that merely brings attention to ourselves.

Some Guidelines:

- Children: Only young children are allowed to wear shorts to church—but not athletic shorts, cut-offs, or "spandex" (which are not appropriate for adults either). Tennis shoes that "light up" should probably be avoided, especially for altar servers, in that they draw attention away from prayer.
- Women: Dresses are certainly most appropriate, and are to be modest (i.e. tank tops, short skirts, low-cut shirts, and skin-tight dresses serve only one purpose contrary to the aim of being in Church). Slacks and pant-suits are an accepted part of our culture, however tight jeans and spandex type wear are never appropriate.
- Men: Men are also to dress modestly as befits a follower of Christ. While coat and tie are by no means mandatory, shirts with collars and clean pants/slacks are not too much to ask. Again, shorts are to be avoided, particularly on Sunday morning.

The above guidelines may be adjusted for services outside of Divine Liturgy, i.e. Vespers. It is better to be in church for prayer, than to not come at all for mere lack of a change of clothes—as may be the case when coming from a Saturday outing, or work-party, etc. Finally, this is not a call for someone to buy a whole new wardrobe just to be a part of the Church! Use your best judgment and good taste when it comes to Church. You don't go to church to be seen by people—you go to present yourself before, and to worship, God.

Making the Sign of the Cross

A person looking around on a Sunday morning may notice that different people cross themselves at different times. To a certain extent, when to cross oneself is a matter of personal piety and not of dogma. However, there are times in the service when crossing oneself (thumb and first two fingers touching each other, third and fourth fingers folded into the palm: touching head first, to stomach, right shoulder to left) is called for:

- To cross: when you hear one of the variations of the phrase “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”; before venerating an icon, Gospel, or Cross; when blessed with an icon, Cross, Gospel, or Chalice; entering and exiting the temple; when passing before the Altar.
- Not to Cross: (only bowing of the head): when blessed with hand (as in “Peace be unto all”), or censed. In receiving a blessing from a bishop or priest one does not make the sign of the Cross beforehand. “In this way ought we to distinguish between reverence toward holy things and toward persons” (Jordanville Prayerbook).

Snacks for Children

Parents often bring little snacks for young children to keep them occupied and quiet in church. This is fine as long as it is discreet and quiet and the parent sees to cleaning up any leftovers. By the time a child is 3-4 years old this will most likely be unnecessary. And by the time a child reaches age 7 they are mostly capable of fasting the entire morning of Holy Communion (or at least cutting back on breakfast). For those children who do require snacks during service, please refrain from feeding them, even a bottle, while in line for Communion, as they ought to come to the Holy Mysteries without food already in their mouths. Chewing gum is never appropriate in church.

Handling the Holy Bread / “Antidoron”

After taking Communion, at the end of the Divine Liturgy, and at Vespers with a “Litya” or “Blessing of Bread”, it is traditional to eat a piece of holy bread or antidoron—the left-over bread from which Holy Communion was prepared and various commemorations made. While antidoron is not the Body and Blood of Christ, it is blessed bread, and as such, we should take precaution to eat it carefully so that crumbs don't fall to be trampled underfoot. Monitor the children as they take the antidoron, teaching them to eat respectfully.

Final Thought

Our American culture of the 21st Century is rather casual in its approach to life. Dress, music, language, values, morals, and entertainment all reflect a trend to “downgrade” life from what God intended it to be. We mustn't allow this prevailing tendency to enter into our Christian piety, whether at home or at church. Most church etiquette is based on simple common sense and a respect for God and others. We are in church to worship God in Holy Trinity. The priest announces, “In the fear of God, with faith and love, draw near.” If we approach our lives and our worship together with this in mind, then we will be people of proper church etiquette.