

## Church Etiquette

*The Lord is in His Holy Temple; let all  
the earth tremble before His presence.  
(Habakkuk 2:20)*

The very word *Orthodox* means “right glory”. To call ourselves Orthodox Christians means that we belong to the Church, whose doctrines and dogmas are true, as they are neither learned opinions nor philosophical speculations, but are God’s revelation to mankind. Our Lord Jesus Christ taught, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24) As we read the sacred history set forth in the Old Testament, much of it describes how God taught the Hebrew people where and how to worship Him. After Our Lord’s Ascension, the disciples “worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.” (Luke 24:52-53) The Acts of the Apostles records that, after Pentecost, the first Christians continued to worship in the Temple daily. (Acts. 2:46). Thus, as Orthodox Christians, we not only believe what is true about God, but we also worship Him in a manner that truly glorifies Him.

The liturgical services of the Orthodox Church are not magical ceremonies, rather they are the fruit of the prayerful labors of holy men, who beheld God’s radiant glory. Their ultimate purpose is to lead us to union with God. Thus, we must approach both the church itself and the divine services with reverent fear.

While each local Orthodox Church may have its own particular pious customs, there are general guidelines of behavior that are common for the entire Church. They are based upon our belief that God Himself is especially present in the church. Our Lord once said, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20) During the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Spirit comes and changes bread and wine into the very body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. After the consecration, the clergy greet one another with “Christ is in our midst” and “He is and shall ever be.” Thus, for all standing in the church, we stand before the very throne of God. Let us hearken to the words of the psalmist, who says “we will go into His tabernacle; we will bow down toward the place where His feet have stood.” (Ps. 131: 7)

Let us imagine we were invited to Buckingham Palace to meet with the Queen of England. Would we be late? Would we dress casually? Would we interrupt her? Would we act silly? Would we not stand respectfully and attentively? Only a barbarian would do such things. Too often, unfortunately, people come late to the church services. They dress very casually. They hold conversations during the services. They do not pay

attention and often distract others. Yet, God- our creator, our king, our father, our redeemer, is present.

It is often said that the church should not be treated as a theater. However, people arrive on time for the theater. They sit quietly and remain in their place until the end of the performance. Often if people are late, they are not admitted. Sadly, people do not treat the church as a theater, rather they treat it like a bar. Like a bar, people come when they want to. They go in and go out as they wish. They come to socialize and play games. Like a bartender, the priest is regarded as an employee, who must serve the customers as they wish. The church is neither a theater or a bar, but rather God's house. We are His invited guests, who have been called to a heavenly banquet.

How then are we to behave in church? What are the proper postures during the services? Slavonic editions of the *Augmented Psalter* (*Следованная Псалтирь*) often provide precise answers to such questions. This guide will address these questions both in a general sense and will reflect the particular standards of our parish.

First and foremost, we must arrive at the services either on time or preferably early. Are we late for work, for school, for entertainments, for a departing flight, or for any important appointment? Let us read Our Lord's parable concerning the foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-15) if we find ourselves often arriving late for the divine services. Arriving early allows us to enter into a more attentive mindset before the service begins. It is also the appropriate time to light candles, submit names for commemoration at the Divine Liturgy, and to venerate the icons.

When we come to the church, we must dress modestly and respectfully. The church is neither a social club nor a fashion show. Our clothes should be neat and clean and should cover the body properly, but not be tight fitting, distractive, or offensive to others. A button-up, collared shirt is most appropriate. At a minimum, our shirts should have sleeves. Shorts are never acceptable, except for children under the age of 7. Men and boys should wear long trousers, khakis, or slacks. Women and girls should wear a dress or skirt that comes down to the knees. Women's trousers, khakis, or slacks, while not normative in traditional Orthodox cultures, are permissible provided they are neither tight-fitting nor distracting. The Holy Apostle Paul clearly instructs women to cover their heads during the divine services (1 Corinthians 11:10). While this practice is encouraged, it is not a requirement in the parishes of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). Women should not approach the chalice for Holy Communion nor kiss any holy objects in the church if they are wearing lipstick.

These standards of modest dress should not be used to judge or chase out others, who are not in conformance. Such persons are generally ignorant of these standards and

must be taught in a gentle and loving manner. Moreover, chastising people over their manner of dress should not take place during a divine service.

Before entering the church, please either turn off or silence your mobile phones. As we approach the doors of the church, we should cross and bow from the waist three times, saying: "God be merciful to me, a sinner", or the more ancient formula: "God be merciful to me, a sinner (*bow*). Thou hast created me, O Lord, have mercy on me (*bow*). I have sinned immeasurably; O Lord, have mercy and forgive me a sinner (*bow*)." Having passed through the doors, we should repeat this. If the service has not begun, we may purchase and light candles, submit names for commemoration at the Divine Liturgy, and venerate the icons. We should then find a place to stand and remain there until the end of the service. We should only leave the church if there is a legitimate necessity. Chairs are provided for the elderly, the infirm, and pregnant women. Moving about the church during the divine services detracts from your own participation and may distract others. The only movement should be that which is prescribed in the service. There are certain times during the service when we should be standing especially attentively, such as during the reading of the six psalms at matins, during any reading from the Holy Scriptures, during an entrance, or during the consecration of the eucharist.

The common posture during any divine service is to stand upright with our arms to our side. In the Russian tradition, especially among the Old Ritualists, it is also common to stand with our arms folded.

If you are late to a divine service and such events are happening, please remain where you are until it has completed and then find a place to stand in the church. You should not be lighting candles or venerating icons (except for after the Gospel lesson at Matins) once the service has begun. Names for commemoration at the Divine Liturgy will not be accepted after the Small Entrance.

Part of the joy of attending the divine services is the fellowship we share with our brothers and sisters in Christ. However, once we have entered the church, we should avoid all superfluous conversation. Please refrain from such conversation until you have left the church building. A modest lunch is offered after most Sunday and certain festal liturgies. This is the time to become acquainted and socialize with members of the parish.

At the conclusion of a divine service, we exit the church in the same manner we entered the church. If you have received Holy Communion during the Divine Liturgy, please remain in the church until the conclusion of the Thanksgiving Prayers. If you have not

received Holy Communion and wish to leave the church after kissing the cross, please do so quietly.

During the divine services, we frequently make the sign of the cross and bow from the waist. However, we do not cross ourselves when being blessed by the bishop or priest, as we approach and withdraw from the holy chalice for communion, and during the six psalms at Matins.

Those who wish to receive Holy Communion, please review the pamphlet *Concerning Holy Communion*, which is available for free at the candle desk. Only baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christians may receive Holy Communion.

Just as we should arrive on time for a divine service, we should remain in the church until its conclusion. It is absolutely sinful to leave the church before the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy if you have received Holy Communion, unless you have volunteered to prepare a meal in the parish hall for the community. If an occasion arises where you are unable to attend the entire service, it is better to be present for part of it than to miss it entirely. If you are not receiving Holy Communion at the Divine Liturgy, it is permissible to leave the church at the dismissal of the catechumens, which occurs at the end of the litany of the catechumens. Likewise, during a Vigil, if you cannot remain for the entire service, it would be best to leave at the conclusion of Vespers, before the reading of the six psalms.

Along with Vespers, Matins, and the Divine Liturgy, other services are frequently held in the church. If you wish to have confession, a moleben, a memorial service (*panikhida*), a baptism, a wedding, or a funeral served, please arrange this with the parish rector. Confession is also available at the conclusion of Vespers or Vigil and one hour before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. Confessions will end ten minutes prior to the beginning of the Divine Liturgy and are not heard during any of the divine services. According to the canons of the Orthodox Church, memorial services should not take place on Sundays. While circumstances facing the Church, both in the Ottoman Empire and in Communist countries, allowed for a relaxing of this rule, current circumstances warrant a return to stricter implementation of this canon.

In conclusion, the Holy Apostle Paul instructs us to do all things “decently and in order.” (1 Cor. 14:40) It is the duty of the clergy and the altar servers to know the order of the services and their ministry therein. It is the duty of the choir to prepare properly to exercise their ministry to the congregation. Those standing among the faithful participate and minister through their very presence, through their prayers, and through their worship. We have all gathered to worship God in spirit and in truth. The

worship in which we participate during this life stands as a foretaste of the eternal worship in which we hope to participate in the life of the age to come. As Orthodox Christians, the most spiritually profound moments of our life occur during the Divine Liturgy. Thus, everything that the Church offers us serves to unite us to God Himself. In trusting in the wisdom of the Church, we find true freedom in Christ. The grace poured forth by the Holy Spirit upon us will manifest itself to all those we encounter through us if we allow it to transform our hearts and minds. Many may pass through our doors and many will be saved by the life and example we set before them.

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